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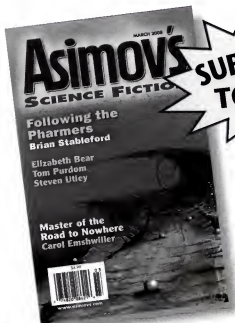
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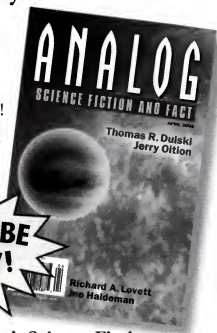
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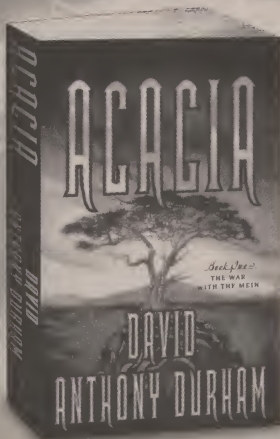
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CONTROLLED CHAOS

While attending Denvention 3 in Denver, Colorado, this summer, I was reminded yet again of what it is that I love about World Science Fiction Conventions. I love the high energy and sensory overload. Some people may think of this energy as pandemonium and mass confusion, but I enjoy the controlled chaos of having too many options—too many things to do with my time. Do I have two hours to spend at the enormous art show, will I be able to ever thread my way through the dealers' room maze, can I fit in the masquerade, the opening ceremony, the Hugo Award ceremony, the science panels, and, of course, the panels with all my favorite authors?

I certainly did all this and more at my first World Science Fiction Convention. In 1973, my father decided that over Labor Day, our family vacation would be spent at Torcon 2. He piled the seven of us into the station wagon, and took off for Canada. I'm not sure my mother was thrilled by the prospect, but he assured her that we would stop off at Niagara Falls and tour Toronto as well. Having read about the masquerade, I'd made costumes for my tweenage sisters (as a self-conscious teenager there was no way I was making one for myself). My younger sisters gamely agreed to be aliens from my imagination, so I spent hours cutting little scales out of green felt and sewing them on yellow leotards.

Once we'd made it to the convention, we dropped my seven-year-old sister off at babysitting. She assures me to this day that she had a marvelous time making dragons and masks and was not scarred for life. I don't remember how my mother and my other sisters stayed busy, but I know there was a plethora of activities for my brother, my father, and me. I

have a vivid memory of the most beautiful chess set I have ever come across. Exquisitely crafted from precious metals, I believe it depicted the characters of Middle Earth. I came across it in the art show, and I could barely pull myself away from it. I returned to stare at this set several times over the course of the weekend. My father and brother, both avid chess players, were disappointed to discover that even if my mother let us mortgage the family home, the chess set was well out of our price range.

My dad was consoled, though, by the thrilling discovery that he could afford the Dum-Dum luncheon, where the actor Buster Crabbe would address Edgar Rice Burroughs aficionados. The three of us caught every panel we could that didn't conflict with some other panel we desperately wanted to attend. It was at this convention that I had my first glimpse of writers like Robert Silverberg, Roger Zelazny, and Gardner Dozois.

At one memorable panel, John Brunner opined that the Arab nations were becoming more united than they had been in the past and that Western nations would soon be begging these countries for oil and paying much steeper prices for it. Little did we know that directly in our future lay the oil embargo of October 1973 that would lead to the painful energy crisis of the mid-seventies.* It was the first time I'd ever heard of OPEC, but, obviously, it wouldn't be the last.

Another profound memory from Torcon 2 was word that J.R.R. Tolkien had died over the weekend. Lin Carter solemnly delivered the news to a stunned audience on the last morning of the convention. Carter also announced that he would sponsor the Gandalf Award for Life Achievement in Fantasy Writing.

Carter told the pleased crowd that the award would be designed by the creator of the art show's fabulous chess set.

Alas, Dum-Dum banquets are no longer held at Worldcons and the last Gandalf Award was bestowed in 1980. These changes haven't given the typical convention attendee any additional free time, however. At this year's Worldcon, you could still attend the masquerade and the art show, but you could also watch robot combat at the "critter crunch." You could spend a day playing games and watching anime, and you could check out the Sidewise Award for alternate history. In the evening, you could attend a square dance on Gany-mede and the following morning you could donate to the Robert A. Heinlein Memorial Blood Drive. There still remains the awesome challenge of having to choose which author panels to attend from the huge schedule of multi-track programming.

At this year's Worldcon, while my own family toured Denver, I spent most of my time meeting with authors and some of my time behind our table in the Exhibit Hall meeting readers. I did manage to bring my six-year-old daughter to breakfast with Mary Rosenblum and to the Hugo rehearsal with Kristine Kathryn Rusch. I took her fourteen-year-old sister to the Hugo ceremony. Due to all my responsibilities, the only panels I attended were my own. I had a lot of fun, but in my heart I envy the teenager who once had the time to make costumes and the freedom to squeeze in so many more of the activities that the Worldcon has to offer.

See you in Montreal! ○

*John Brunner may not have been the first person to make this prediction, but it was the first time I'd ever heard of the possibility, and as far as I know, it was the first time for my dad, too. Ten years later, my father and I attended the 1983 World SF Convention—Con-Stellation—in Baltimore, Maryland. John Brunner was the guest of honor, and my dad insisted that we had to attend his guest of honor speech. "After all," my father said, "we don't want to miss what he's going to predict this time!"

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HIC RHODUS, HIC SALTA

Careful readers of this column will know that the science fiction of "Murray Leinster," which was the pseudonym of Will F. Jenkins, has been on my mind for the past couple of issues. Another of his works has crossed my path now: the best-known of his stories, "First Contact" (1945), which deals—brilliantly—with the problems that humans will face on their initial encounter with an alien starship in interstellar space.

The first problem, of course, is figuring out how to speak with the aliens. Leinster solves this in his usual efficient way: "We've hooked up some machinery," said Tommy, 'that amounts to a mechanical translator.'" After some plausible-sounding engineering talk about frequency modulation and short-wave beams, Tommy goes on to tell his captain, "We agreed on arbitrary symbols for objects, sir, and worked out relationships and verbs and so on with diagrams and pictures. We've a couple of thousand words that have mutual meanings. We set up an analyzer to sort out their short-wave groups, which we feed into a decoding machine. And then the coding end of the machine picks out recordings to make the wave groups we want to send back. When you're ready to talk to the skipper of the other ship, sir, I think we're ready."

All very neat and clever. Communication is opened between the two ships, and Leinster can proceed to the real focus of the story—the ticklish issue of interstellar diplomacy. If this is not the first use in science fiction of that handy gadget, the electronic translating machine, it is certainly one of the earliest and best. From then on, spacefarers voyaging into alien territory in the pages of magazines like *Astounding* and *Galaxy* routinely uncorked their translating machines as needed, thus allowing them to

get on to their interstellar tasks and the authors to get on to their story's plot requirements.

All very convenient for us writers. Your protagonist comes across an alien, pulls out a device no bigger than an iPod (and how that great gadgeteer Murray Leinster would have loved iPods!) and interspecies communication becomes as easy as Pi. But it's all a little on the glib side, too. How well, one wonders, would these marvelous translating machines work in reality? In a 2003 column that discussed the vagaries of the here-and-now translating programs (terrestrial languages only) that are available all over the Internet I had this to say:

Science fiction writers, as you know, are in the habit of equipping their spacefaring heroes with translating devices that swiftly and accurately render unfamiliar alien languages into lucid English. We have always suspected that creating such a device would be, of course, easier said than done. In Kim Stanley Robinson's 1990 story "The Translator," which pokes lethal fun at the concept of a translating machine, a hapless Earthman meeting with two alien species at once has one group tell him things like "*Warlike viciously now descendant fat food flame death*" while the other comes through the translating gizmo with sounds that can be translated, the machine says, as "*1. Fish market. 2. Fish harvest. 3. Sunspots visible from a depth of 10 meters below the surface of the ocean on a calm day. 4. Traditional festival. 5. Astrological configuration in galactic core.*"

What causes me now to reflect once again on the unlikelihood of our getting to understand the speech of alien beings

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is my stumbling across a choice example of mistranslation of a language we know very well—Latin—done not by a computer but by actual human beings, highly intelligent ones, a translation that has been bungled and rebungled for hundreds of years until we no longer can be sure of the original meaning.

In a 1953 essay by the Swiss scholar Herbert Luthy on the writings of the philosopher Montaigne I came upon a Latin phrase that was new to me and left unexplained in Luthy's text: *Hic Rhodus, hic salta*. I still remember some of the Latin that I studied more than fifty years ago, and my first attempt at a translation produced "*Here is Rhodes, dance here*." Which made little sense to me; but then I recalled that in Italian, a language of which I have some knowledge, the verb *saltare* means "to jump." Perhaps the phrase quoted by Luthy was late Latin, I thought; late Latin was practically Italian: "*Here is Rhodes, jump here*." But that seemed just as nonsensical. Off I went to my Latin dictionary. I found the verb *salire*, meaning "to jump," which gave rise to a later verb, *saltare*, which in Latin meant "to jump repeatedly," i.e. "to dance," from which the Italian verb for jumping came, though Italian has a different word meaning "to dance." ("*Salire*," in Italian, has lost its old Latin meaning and now means "to climb," by the way.) I also found the noun *saltus*, meaning "a leap" or "a jump." Well, whether jump or dance, the phrase still was baffling. So my next stop was Google.

The Google link for *Hic Rhodus, hic salta* traced the phrase back to one of Aesop's fables. Aesop, if he existed at all, was a Greek who lived in the sixth century BC, but the earliest texts of his fables that have come down to us are Latin versions of the first or second century AD, and in those the phrase is given as *Hic Rhodus, hic saltus*, which means, essentially, "Here [is] Rhodes, here [make your] jump." The fable concerns a fellow who has returned after having been away from home for a while and be-

gins bragging about the feats of athletic valor that he had performed while traveling. In Rhodes, he claims, he took part in a long-jump contest and made such a jump that not even an Olympic athlete could equal it. Whereupon a skeptical bystander calls his bluff, saying, and I translate freely, "All right: let's pretend that this is Rhodes. Now jump!"

That explained the phrase, but not why Herbert Luthy had used the imperative verb *salta*, with its connotation of dancing, in place of the Latin noun *saltus*, "a jump," that we find in our texts of Aesop. The answer, I learned, is that Karl Marx is to blame, or maybe Friedrich Hegel.

Hegel, it seems, had used the phrase—first in Greek, and then in Latin with *saltus*—in the preface to his *Philosophy of Right* (1821). He doesn't explain it, and in fact doesn't seem to understand its Aesopian meaning, because he appears to think it connotes jumping over the entire island of Rhodes. He goes on to give it a German translation—*Hier ist die Rose, hier tanze*, meaning "Here is the rose, dance here." Apparently the switch from "Rhodes" to "rose" involves a pun in Greek, substituting *rodon* ("rose") for *Rodos* ("Rhodes"). The rose Hegel is talking about seems to be the symbol of the mystic order of the Rosicrucians, my source tells me, an explanation I did not find helpful.

Marx comes into the story because he is responsible for the garbled *salta* translation, perhaps working backward to Latin from Hegel's pun. In a book published in 1852 he gave the phrase as *Hic Rhodus, hic salta*, which, since it refers to dancing rather than jumping, has no Aesopian meaning, and then in Hegel's punning mistranslation, "Here is the rose, dance here." Hegel, at least, seemed to know he was punning. But Marx appears to think that he is translating, although *Rhodus* in this context can only be the Latin name of the island off the coast of Asia Minor, not the Latin word for "rose," which is, you will be relieved to know, *rosa*. Nevertheless, Marx's essentially

meaningless mistranslation of the Aesopian punchline, minus the rest of the fable, seems to have passed into philosophical discourse as a tag with the original Aesopian meaning, that is, something like "put up or shut up."

An interesting twist now enters the tale: the possibility that phrase in its original form may not have included a reference to the island of Rhodes at all. As I noted above, the original Greek texts of Aesop's fables have been lost for more than a thousand years. Aesop himself first is mentioned in Greek literature in the fifth century BC, more than a hundred years after he supposedly lived, but, like Homer, he is a legendary figure about whom we know nothing that can be regarded as trustworthy. Probably someone of that name did compose some fables, but other fables that we regard as the work of Aesop may well have been the work of others, and the biographical information we have about him is best thought of as fiction.

A biography of the scholar Deme-trius of Phalerius dating from the fourth century BC credits Deme-trius with having compiled a collection of "Aesopic fables," but his book has not survived to our time. For our knowledge of the fables ascribed to Aesop we must turn to several Latin translations dating from the early days of the Roman Empire, one by a certain Babrius, another by a certain Phaedrus. And in the case of the fable of the boastful jumper, one student of the fables suggests, these early translators may have given us an inaccurate version of the Greek original.

I've already mentioned that the Greek name for the island of Rhodes is *Rodos*. But *rodos*, without the capital letter

(and the early Greeks were very haphazard about capitalizing), is the Greek word for the long rod that pole-vaulters use to propel themselves over the bar. So the original tale may have finished with the skeptical onlooker saying, "All right: here's a rod. Now let's see you jump!" By using the wrong meaning for *rodos*, the Latin translator was forced to insert Rhodes as the site of the braggart's exploit, and, later, Karl Marx (with some help from Hegel) added another layer of confusion by using *rodon*, "rose," instead of *rodos*, "Rhodes" or "rod."

If you have been having difficulty following this tangled tale, let me assure you that you are not the only one. I have taken you through it simply to show you that translating from one language to another is no easy matter. Classical Greek was still a living language in the time of Tiberius Caesar when Phaedrus was making his Latin translation of Aesop, and yet it is possible that Phaedrus misunderstood the Greek text's use of *rodos* and thus brought the isle of Rhodes into the tale. Hegel, who, like all educated men in the nineteenth century, was quite at home in Latin and Greek, had not fully understood the Latin text of the proverb where it mentions Rhodes, and then had—deliberately, it seems—given it a further twist to make it read "Here is the rose, dance here," which Marx—who surely knew the classical languages also—picked up and passed along, making it available now in transmogrified form for Herbert Luthy to baffle me with a century later. If these brilliant men couldn't get one of Aesop's fables straight, what luck do you think a translating machine is going to have with the poetry of Betelgeuse XIX? ○

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HEAR NOW

history

In an installment I wrote three years ago, I brought you tidings of a great new way to waste time on the internet.

Podcasting <podcast.com>, remember? As a dedicated time waster myself, I decided not only to sample some podcasts but also to create one <feeds.feedburner.com/freereads> myself. Since that column first fell under the light of your eyes, I've managed to podcast two novels, bunches of short stories and a handful of these columns. As with almost all other podcasts, these are available for free downloading under a **Creative Commons** <creativecommons.org> license. And since 2005, podcasting in general—and genre podcasting in particular—has flourished. There are now many excellent news, interview, and review podcasts, several interesting audio theater series, and an ever-increasing number of fiction podcasts. As you might expect, the range of accomplishment in podcasting is vast. Yes, there are all too many bumblerers in love with the sound of their own voices, but they're also insightful critics and writers of real talent stepping up to microphones around the world.

Podcasting is just part of what has been called **New Media** <newmedia.org>, a buzzword for all things digital: blogs, wikis, mashups, email and its attachments, messaging, metaverses, video games, and the like. Although these modes of communication are new(ish) and definitely media, I'm not sure that even they can be productively lumped into a group that has any real meaning. However, it is worth thinking about the differences between the way media used to be created and disseminated and the

way the internet has changed everything. For one thing, everything is faster (duh!). But compare email and snailmail. Encyclopedias and wikis. **Grand Theft Auto IV** <rockstargames.com/IV> and **Clue** <ideafinder.com/history/inventions/clue.htm>. APAs and listservs.

Huh? APA?

I probably need to insert a quick explanation for those of you born after **Star Trek: The Original Series** <startrek.com/startrek/view/series/TOS> went dark. Know that before the internet, groups of fans used to communicate with each other via Amateur Press Associations. Everyone would print enough pages of their opinions, reactions and, yes, rants to service all of the other members and then send them to a CM (Central Mailer) who would collate the lot and then snail them to all the members. After everyone digested the contents, the process would begin again. Ah, the sweet, sick aroma of mimeograph ink!

New Media tends to be more interactive than old media, mostly by design but in part because of the speed factor. If you have ever tried to plan an impromptu dinner with a bunch of busy friends or gone back and forth with your editor over manuscript changes (hi, Sheila!), you know how important interactivity is—even to plain old email. And of course, wikis have proved that the group mind is wise, if subject to controversy. Meanwhile video games and proto-metaverses like **World of Warcraft** <worldofwarcraft.com> and **Second Life** <second.life.com> point the way to the holy grail of interactivity, **Virtual Reality** <ovrt.nist.gov/hotvr.html>.

But I digress. My point is that although podcasting is supposedly part of new media, it isn't particularly interactive. And unlike metaverses and videogames, podcasts are infinitely reproducible. So which of these does not belong?

community

Although I've been a guest on several interview podcasts, I had never really connected in person with my fellow podcasters until Memorial Day 2008, when I headed down to **Balticon** <balticon.org>. Largely due to the efforts of Paul Fischer, host of the excellent **Balticon Podcast** <balticonpodcast.org>, Balticon has become one of the two most important conventions for this growing community, the other being the sprawl that is **DragonCon** <dragoncon.org>. Balticon 42 boasted a separate track dedicated to podcasting, with panels on voice acting, copyright, promotion, and adapting literary works, to name but a few. A number of con-goers recorded podcasts in front of live audiences, to the general merriment. But one particular goal I set for myself at the con was to chat up some of the podcast novelists in attendance. In the last year, a handful of them have been making publishing history by selling print rights to work that saw first "publication" as podcasts.

Without doubt the superstar of this select group is **Scott Sigler** <scottsigler.com>. According to his website "Scott reinvented book publishing when he released *Earthcore* as the world's first 'podcast-only' novel. Released in twenty weekly episodes, *Earthcore* harkened back to the days of serialized radio fiction and picked up ten thousand subscribers along the way." *Earthcore* was subsequently published by **Dragon Moon Press** <dragonmoonpress.com>; reprint rights have since been picked up by Crown. While some may scoff at the notion that Sigler has indeed "reinvented book publishing," he reports that individual episodes of his five podcast novels have had more than four million downloads. Meanwhile he has parlayed his success as

a podcast novelist into a book deal reportedly worth more than half a million dollars. There's something happening here.

What it is ain't exactly clear.

podcasting stars

Alas, Scott Sigler wasn't at Balticon, but I did get a chance to interview three podcast novelists who have had similar, if somewhat less spectacular, success.

J.C. Hutchins <jchutchins.net> is author of the *Seventh Son* trilogy, three original-podcast near future thrillers, *Descent*, *Deceit*, and *Destruction*. Thanks to the support of *Seventh Son* fans worldwide, *Descent* will be published in 2009 by St. Martin's Press.

Tee Morris <teemorris.com> is credited with publishing the first podcast novel in 2005, *Morevi*. Unlike Sigler's *Earthcore*, *Morevi* had a print edition from Dragon Moon Press in 2002. Altogether he has four novels in print: *Morevi*, *Legacy of Morevi*, *Billibub Baddings and the Case of the Singing Sword*, and *The Case of the Pitcher's Pendant: A Billibub Baddings Mystery*.

Mur Lafferty <murverse.com> has podcast two serialized novels, *Heaven* and *Playing for Keeps*. *Playing for Keeps* has been published by **Swarm Press** <swarmpress.com>. Her stories have appeared on **Escape Pod** <escapepod.org> and she was formerly the editor of its horror offspring, **Pseudopod** <pseudopod.org>.

I asked them how they got into podcasting:

Hutch: "When I first started podcasting *Seventh Son*, I did it just to release it into the wild. I hoped it would generate some interest in my name, but I didn't think the book could be published because I had spent a year trying to find an agent and I couldn't. I just wanted to clear my plate and move on to the next project. But after I had about five thousand listeners, I started thinking I should pursue publication again. So originally this had just been a lark, a way to let me play in the same space as the Scott Siglers of the world. Now I've got an engaged audience and I've got the

marketing skills to promote my brand, so I'm asking myself how can I use podcasting going forward in clever ways to further my career as a writer."

Mur: "I was writing audio essays and sending them to NPR, but they disappeared into a black hole. So finally I decided that I would give those away online. That built an audience of people who were interested in my essays and then I started my writing podcast (Jim here: Faithful readers will recall that I have praised **I Should Be Writing** <isbw.murlafferty.com> as an essential resource for aspiring writers) and talked about my stories. It took me a while to figure out that if I was getting a good response to my essays, I might also get a good response to my stories."

Tee: "I had already published a print edition of *Morevi* and my publisher asked what I was going to do to help launch the sequel in 2005. I had been listening to podcasts and I asked her for the audio rights. She had no idea what I was doing, but since she had no plans for audio, she said go for it. The podcast of *Morevi* was my promotion for *Legacy of Morevi*. And then my publisher started writing me, 'Tee, I just got an order from the Netherlands. I just got an order from Germany. Whatever you're doing, keep doing it.' And that's what got me into podcasting. *Morevi* is still in print and it's actually doing better now because of the podcast."

I asked if they had any advice for up-and-coming podcasters:

Mur: "I think that new podcasters are looking at me and Sigler and Hutchins and Morris and seeing the success that we have and they are thinking they can jump directly from where they are to where we are. They ignore the years we've put into podcasting. I get email all the time from people who say they want to podcast their novel and I want to ask them why? What is your goal? If your goal is just to post your novel online, go ahead. My goal is to be a professional writer and I know I have to go the traditional publishing route, because podcasting isn't going to make me any money."

Hutch: "When people ask me for ad-

vice I ask them if they have exhausted every resource they had to try to find an agent or a publisher? If I had scored an agent in 2005, I would never have gone into podcasting."

Tee: "The whole fear factor of 'we don't want to give it away because nobody will buy it,' that's a fallacy. My sales have been going up every year, I've sold more books because of my podcasting." (Jim here: Of course, Tee is the exception here in that he was published in print before he began podcasting.) "Everything I've podcast so far has been post-publication. I do have plans for podcasting before publication but not for a couple of years."

I wondered if, given the burgeoning popularity of podcasting, it's possible for newcomers to compete with early adopters who've already made names for themselves. Mur said that there are still opportunities for success and cited the work of Nathan Lowell, whose **The Golden Age of the Solar Clipper** <durandus.org/golden> series now consists of four novels and counting. He's quickly become one of **Podiobooks**' <podiodbooks.com> most popular authors.

Mur: "But he's a rarity. Other people put their books up and then they wait and then they get mad when nothing happens. But they're not promoting the work, marketing it."

Hutch: "When I hear the word *competition*, I immediately think of buying things. But podcasting isn't a bookstore. I think of it as a library. It's all free; you're just competing for time. That book will always be there on the (digital) shelf, so you can always come back to it. Is this space saturated? Well, it is. Is this space saturated with killer content? No."

exit

Next time we'll hear more from these talented podcasters and find out whether some of the astronomical number of listeners they report have any basis in reality (hint: yes!) Also we'll look at some of the hot new short fiction podcast sites.

Keep listening! ○

ON ZURLYGG STREET

A Primer for Children of This Station

Time for Schooling

"Run, Tom," said Mother.

"Run, Betty, run. It is time for schooling. Run fast!"

Away ran Tom and Betty toward the schooling pod.

"Good-bye, Mother," they called.

"We are on our way to schooling. Good-by, Gek."

Gek saw Tom and Betty go. Though he was not bio-sentient, he was able to miss them.

He wanted to go to schooling. His job was computational skills for the homeplace, but he wanted to go to schooling too.

He wanted to run after Tom and Betty. But he did not go. Though he was not bio-sentient, he knew computationally that he needed an "excuse."

Then Gek flipped up on his tri-pod to see better.

He could see something through the homeplace window.

He could see something on the alloy path to the schooling pod.

He could see Tom's shiny red Station Positioning Device on the path.

Gek opened the homedoor with his circuit links.

Gek ran to the SPD and grabbed it with his one free waldo.

Then he ran after Tom.

He ran down the special alloy path after Tom.

He saw Tom go through the pneumatic door of the schooling pod.

Gek ran to the schooling pod, too.

He jumped and jumped against the door. He jumped so hard he fell.

But the door did not open. It would not open to jumping.

"Kupp! Kupp! Kupp!" Gek said. It was the one sound he could make.

"Can that be Gek?" said Tom inside.

He ran to press the opener.

"Gek! Gek!" said Tom.

"You have my shiny red SPD."

"You are a loyal and useful Mark 3-C Mobile, Gek!"

"Thank you, Gek!"

The children in the pod laughed.

It was fun to see a Mark 3-C being useful and funny.

"Come on, Gek," they said. "Come for schooling with us."

"Gek cannot come in," said Tom.

"Gek cannot come for schooling," said Tom.

"A CompuMobile cannot come in for schooling," said the teacher, a bio-sentient trained for order.

But Gek did not want to go back to the homeplace.

He looked at the pod full of children.

He wanted to be schooling with Tom.

He wanted to be schooling with the children.

"Come in, Gek," said the teacher, changing her mind. "The children like you.

You may be able to help them learn. Will you be a loyal and useful Mark 3-C?"

"Kupp! Kupp!" said Gek. "Kupp! Kupp!"

By the end of the day Gek had done well.

He had helped the children learn.

He had helped them learn by laughing.

He had helped them by elevating their neurotransmitters.

Gek also scored higher than the children on tests.

He scored higher because bio-sentience isn't everything.



—Bruce McAllister

Mary Rosenblum's novel *Horizons* from Tor Books is available at bookstores, and her Drylands collection, *Water Rites* is available from Fairwood Press fairwoodpress.com. You can find out more about her writing at maryrosenblum.com. Mary lives on country acreage where she trains dogs for tracking and sheep herding trials. Her knowledge of animal life lends verisimilitude to the terrifying dangers one can encounter on a . . .

LION WALK

Mary Rosenblum

Tahira Ghani stared down at all that was left of the trespasser, the stunner pointed down at the summer yellow grass. The big California condor she had interrupted spread its huge stretch of wings and gave a reproachful squawk, scattering the smaller turkey vultures. A hot breeze washed their carrion scent over her, but she barely noticed. The pride probably hadn't left much, and the coy-dogs—well on their way to emulating the Pleistocene wild dogs—had cleaned up whatever the lions hadn't eaten before the vultures even had a chance. She squatted beside the mess, smelling a trace of blood, spilled guts, lion, and the musky tang of violent death on the hot wind. A torn, bloodstained piece of black fabric fluttered in the breeze, snagged on a hawthorn. Flies swarmed over the few vertebrae and the piece of a rib that remained, the rags of flesh dark red brown now, the color of old blood. A strand of auburn hair caught her eye, tangled among grass stems. Long. A woman? Like the other one. Caucasian this time. She read the diary of last night in the scuffed ground where the lions had killed, the tracks leading to it, faint on the dry grass, human prints overlaid with lion. She squatted, the stunner in one hand, her dun suncloth coverall hot against her thighs. Laid her fingertips lightly on the double imprint; woman, lion. Brought her hand to her mouth and touched her tongue to her fingertips, tasting dust, dead leaves, and lion.

Running. No shoes. Tahira stood, wiped her fingers on her coverall, and circled the dusty patch of ground that gave up this information, shaded her eyes to stare at the single print, the faint ovals of toes, ball of foot. No blood, so she hadn't been barefoot long. Frowning, she searched the prairie bisected by the willow-clad banks of the river. Maybe the intruder had thought the river could save her. *Barefoot?* In the distance, beyond the summer yellow grass and white fluff of the seeding thistles, the stark peaks of the Rockies jutted against the cloudless sky. Once they had had snow on them, even in the summer. Not in her lifetime. Her frown deepened as she studied the marks where the lions had lain to eat. Coy-dog tracks pocked the dust and flattened grass, along with the prints of the turkey vultures. The condor had chased them away, and now they circled patiently overhead waiting for her to leave. By tomorrow, you'd find no traces to prove that someone had died and the lions had eaten here.

Tahira's frown deepened as she used her link to video the site. She dug into her day-pack for a plastic bag, waved the blow flies from the vertebrae, and carefully bagged them. Plenty of flesh for a DNA identification. If this trespasser had wanted to be eaten, she could not have done a better job of placing herself in the old lioness's path.

Just like the other one.

Tahira collected the fabric and hair, added them to the bag, then trudged back to her skimmer, stowed the stunner in the scabbard beneath the saddle, and climbed aboard. The vultures were already descending, dodging the condor's half-hearted feints, squabbling as they searched for overlooked scraps, their huge black wings raising dust from the scuffed ground. She pulled out her link and texted a report of the intruder's death to her boss. Then she frowned at the screen and turned it off. He'd scream about the PR aspects. Not now.

The fabric, torn, dirty, and bloody as it was, had had the feel of silk, the sexy kind of shirt you might buy to wear for a lover. Tahira toed the skimmer to life and lifted gently from the riverbank.

Thoughtfully, she pulled her AR goggles on and zoomed in on the ground as she spiraled slowly outward from the site of the killing, reading the night's traffic in the bent grass stems, the wisp of tan hair snagged on a tangle of riverbank willow.

She knew where this pride would be lying up, didn't need to search for their chip signatures with the tracking software. Every major mammal in the Pleistocene Preserve was chipped, from coy-dogs to the new pair of giant sloths that had the gene engineers popping champagne corks, but after her years here, she rarely needed to use a chip to find what she was looking for.

Tahira accelerated until the wind pulled her lips back from her teeth. Not one perimeter alarm had gone off last night. Same with the last one.

Tahira spied a patch of tawny hide in the shade beneath a clump of hawthorn a split second before the goggles ringed it with red and flashed an ID number above it. She braked hard, spiraled back and down. That was the small male, the one with the ragged ear, one of the old lioness's last surviving cubs. He was a classic African type, with a full tawny mane and only a hint of the Pleistocene striping and narrower head. Which meant he was on the cull list. Like the old lioness. The IDs of the rest of the pride flashed into view. Right where she knew they would be. The old lioness was on her feet, looking up at the skimmer, her scarred face and faded, ratty fur a testament to her age. She was smart and she learned quickly. An offering like the girl would have been too good to pass up the first time. This second offering would have been easier to take.

Tahira sighed, and spun the skimmer away, out over the broad plain of yellow summer grass patched with the dusty gray green of hawthorn and the darker junipers. A small herd of antelope raised their heads as she soared over, tails flashing nervously. The big herd would be farther north, she'd check on them as she circled home. A hawk soared at eye level as she rose, turned its attention back to the ground, searching for rodents flushed by the antelope below. Tahira checked on the horse herd, found them southward, watering at the grassy back of the narrow river, whose waters ran clear and dark. Automatically, she noted the dwindling feeder stream that would be down to a trickle in another month. No glaciers to keep rivers running out here, not anymore. Dark tails whisked their dun sides and they stamped dark-striped legs at the biting flies. The gene engineers were winning here, too. They had engineered the original Przewalski's horse into a chunky look-alike to the horses that had grazed this plain in the Pleistocene. They were working hard on the elephants now. Some of the recent calves were going to be huge and hairy. She did a quick count of the herd using her link software to scan the GPS chips, although she really didn't need to. She'd have all the numbers available from the daily sat-scan when she got back to Admin. She didn't have to do the rounds in person at all, but she liked to see for herself.

And the last body hadn't showed up on the Security report at Admin. She suspected this one wouldn't either.

The lead mare raised her head as she circled. The lame filly was gone, probably brought down by the same lion pride that had taken the trespasser. They would have gotten the filly long ago except that the old lead mare was her dam and had protected her foal fiercely, with the whole herd to back her up. Luck must have aided the pride. The old lioness was showing her age, and avoided the hard kills now.

So she had taken the meal that had walked up and asked to be eaten.

How in the name of all that was unholy had the trespasser gotten past the Perimeter?

Tahira kicked the skimmer to high speed, circled south to where the bison herd grazed the lowlands, their huge, erect horns another testament to the geneticists' wizardry. The eastern elephant troop was hanging around there right now, close enough to the monorail to give the tourists a good show. Sure enough, a train had stopped and even at her height and speed she could make out the passengers hanging out the windows, pointing their links. Their tour goggles would pick out the hairy mastodon-type calves for them and explain in a pleasant voice how the engineers were tweaking the genome. The old cow raised her trunk to blow at Tahira as she skimmed by, then went back to scooping dust from the wallow they'd created, tossing it in ochre showers over her back. Tahira didn't see any of the camels, but they were probably all back in the trees, out of the sun. They, too, were changing. The old lioness was the only remaining lion that carried wholly African genes, had been wild-caught as a cub.

Tahira liked her for that.

With a sigh, Tahira grounded the skimmer to text a quick report on her find to her boss. Then she shut off the link before he could reply and swung the skimmer northward to find the big antelope herd.

The sun was dipping toward the horizon by the time she returned to Admin. Only the solar farm beyond the low, ochre buildings, row upon row of collectors following the sun, spelled "tech." The earth-brick buildings might have been built by some primitive peoples, blending gently into the summer prairie. Tech was pretty much invisible now—except in the dry lands where the ranked mirrors of the solar farms and the wind towers had supplanted juniper and sage. But nobody went out there. Her village would have suited this landscape, she thought. Huts decaying slowly into the shriveling desert that had once fed lions and antelope and people. Tahira set the skimmer down hard and fast on the small landing pad behind the building. The trickle of water down the central interior water wall washed a breath of moist cool and greenery-scent over her as she entered, tempting her to strip, shower, and sit in the pool. She ached after her full day on the skimmer. Once upon a time, she had not ached. It was time to make another appointment at the geri clinic. Or perhaps not. Every cycle had a natural end. Well, perhaps that was no longer true. Tahira sighed at the angry blink of the red priority icon above the holo deck.

She ignored it and instead seated herself on her working cushion, doing full lotus for concentration. Called up Security. Some eye somewhere must have seen the girl last night. She started a search for predator-prey movement, narrowed the profile to a human's mass. No point in watching rodents and coy-dogs. That got her lions, antelope, bison calves. A headache blossomed behind her eyes as the images flickered through her field.

Then . . . there she was. Shadowy, slender, her arms, neck, face, legs stark white in the night-eye recording, that black shirt that would be torn and bloodied revealing a deep cleavage and breasts that were small enough to be natural, not sculpted. Tahira's eyes narrowed. Short shorts, sexy clothes, nothing you'd wear into the thorny scrub of the Preserve. Sandals—so she had lost them, running. No blood on that

white skin. She hadn't waded through the hawthorn then. How old? Sixteen? No, she decided. Less. Maybe fourteen. That was how old her daughter had been, last time she had seen her. Tahira tasted blood, realized she was biting her lip. She watched the girl wince, bend a slender leg to rub at something—thorn or bite. She looked lost. Pissed. Stood up by a date pissed.

Then her expression changed from lost-and-angry to startled. Then frightened. She looked around and for an instant her eyes seemed to meet Tahira's. Accusingly.

Like an antelope, she turned and bolted, running through the grass and thorns. One of the sandals flew off, a twinkle of motion on the screen.

"Don't run." Tahira said it out loud.

In the holo field the girl kept running and in a second vanished from the eye's sweep.

Tahira found herself standing. Muttered a curse. She skimmed to the next eye, which should have picked up the girl's panicked flight and probably the kill, since it covered that sector.

It showed her grass, scrub, the scurry of a small rodent, the silent float of an owl. The small dying shriek of the rodent made her flinch, then she skimmed back through that eye's sequence.

Nothing. She slowed the segment, watched the owl creep across the scene. Frowned. Seed heads bowed the grass. This species had finished seeding weeks ago and the seed heads had shattered, spilling their ripe seeds.

She copied and filed both sequences and had the station AI code them for search identification. Then she set the AI searching the Preserve's security base for an exact match to the quiet scene recorded by the second eye. Within a minute, a 99 percent match popped up in her holo field. Side by side, two owls floated and twin shrieks split the quiet. She checked the properties. Yep. The scene had been recorded five weeks ago, on a quiet night with . . . she checked . . . no security alerts, not even a native antelope bumping the perimeter fence.

For several moments, she frowned at the now-frozen images, then blanked them. This time, she directed her AI to match the visual image of the girl running, but she directed it to search the web, excluding only the Preserve datafiles.

That search was going to take some time.

With a sigh, she emailed the video of the girl and the twin owl sequences to her boss, then reached into the holo field to touch the angry, blinking priority icon.

It took five full minutes for Carlo to appear. Which meant he was probably in bed. With someone. He had just spent a week at a body-spa and he was probably trying out the upgrades. Tahira braced herself as Carlo's face and torso appeared in the field, yes, wrapped in a silken robe, his usually perfect hair tousled. "About time." His eyes narrowed. "Where were you? I called you as soon as I got your report but your link didn't answer."

"Checking the range."

"You have software to do that."

"The software didn't find her. I did."

"Has the media gotten hold of this?" Carlo looked over his shoulder, back to her, lowered his voice. "I assume not, or my interface would have picked it up and alerted me." His dark eyes snapped. "All right. This time, you need to find out how the trespasser got in. And why Security failed to alert you. Again. Meanwhile, you will euthanize the lions involved. As insurance against media clamor. We will have done all we could do."

"It's not the lions' fault." Tahira shook her head. "The girl was meant to run into them. She was dropped right in front of them."

"What do you mean she was dropped?" He ran a hand through his hair. "Make sense, Tahira, will you?"

"She was dropped." Tahira bit the words off. "By a skimmer, helicopter. Something. She was in sandals. Bedroom type. I just emailed you the Security clip that *did* pick her up. And the clip that was used to replace most of the visuals."

He stared at her. "That's unbelievable." He chopped her words aside with the flat of his hand. "Do you know how much it would cost to do that kind of hack job? Worry about the Perimeter security. Something is down. The lion euthanasia shows the public that we're doing a good job of dealing with this. The US media will howl if they get hold of this. You know how they feel about the Preserve."

Yes, she knew.

"I can sacrifice you or I can sacrifice a lion or two. You decide, Tahira." Carlo's eyes narrowed. "And before you say anything, you're a hell of a lot more valuable to me than the lions, they're breeding just fine. Besides, as soon as the genetics geeks get their *Panthera leo atrox* phenotype we won't use African lions anymore anyway. So let's just call it moot and drop it." He glanced over his shoulder again and his mouth tightened briefly. Turned back to Tahira. "I am ordering you to euthanize a lion that killed this person. Make sure you get a DNA match so we can prove it, and I'll leave it to you to get the right one. I'll let you claim it was a rogue animal and make it plausible."

He was giving her a lot. Carlo could have demanded the whole pride—the media would press for it. He could have fired her. "Can we talk about how this girl got in here? She was a girl, Carlo. Dressed for a hot date. Go take a look at that clip I sent you. She did not hike in from the Perimeter. I think that's a bit more important than pleasing the media."

"No, it's not." Carlo cut her off with another chop of his aristocratic hand. "If we're lucky, nobody will pick it up. Make sure you secure those video files. The administrative contract for the Preserve comes up for renewal in one month. The US will push hard to take it over, as usual. If you want a job a month from now, you'd better hope the World Council thinks we're doing a good job here and doesn't award the contract somewhere else." The holo field blanked.

Tahira stared into the opalescent shimmer.

He was right. The vast Preserve, the huge central section of the US that had been restored to its Pliocene ecology, including megafauna and the species that had inhabited this land millions of years ago, was part of a giant experiment in ecological climate control. And genetic engineering. And a huge tourist draw, which the US *did* like. A lot of countries were uneasy about it, seeing a threat to their own grasslands and dwindling wildlands as the growing Gaiist movement used carbon credit leverage to press for more preservation. Too much media outcry and the US might garner enough support to end the Preserve and take over control of the huge area again, never mind the carbon credits they'd then owe. It was a matter of national pride, she thought sourly. That had always transcended logic.

She made herself a pot of very black tea and began to go through the security records for the past twenty-four hours, searching for human-sized mass or any sign of a small-craft landing. As the sun cleared the horizon, she finally shut down her station and stumbled off to her small room behind the water wall, sprawling sweaty and fully clothed across her bed.

No airspace invasion, no vehicles, nobody on foot. Maybe the girl had teleported in. She laughed sourly. Sure.

Just like the last one.

"Tahira? Hey, Tahira, are you okay?"

Jen's voice. Tahira blinked crusted eyes, swimming up from a deep pool of sleep and dreams she couldn't remember but that had stalked her like lions. "Late night."

She realized that she had spoken in Sotho, switched to English. "Sorry. I just need some tea." She sat up, stiff and sticky in her dirty clothes, rubbed her eyes.

"I already made you some." Jen stood in the doorway, nervous, a mug in one hand. "When you didn't hear me come in I figured you really needed tea."

"Yeah. Thanks." Tahira got up, glad that she hadn't stripped last night, and took the mug. "I appreciate it." She gave him a smile because this too-earnest graduate student had tried to climb into her bed a week ago, never mind the age difference. And her "no thanks" had apparently bruised him. She swallowed a stinging gulp of the strong-enough tea, gave Jen a nod of approval. Usually, he made it too weak.

"You got official mail." Jen stood just outside the door, as if a strand of Perimeter fencing blocked it, his beaded and braided silver-white hair—stark contrast to his tawny skin and intended to be sexy—swinging forward around his face with his nod. "Security seal. Looks important."

"Yeah." Tahira drank more tea. The official execution orders. "We had another trespasser last night."

"You're kidding." Jen's eyes got round. "No, you're not. Another . . . another kill? What are we going to do about it?"

She brushed past him, angry because two plus two was a simple equation. But guilt stabbed her. He had brought strong tea. And he didn't really understand the Preserve politics. She paused, looked back, and shrugged. "I'll have to kill one of the lions, of course. Even though it wasn't really their fault."

The information didn't move him, but why should it? He was a graduate student, studying the symbiosis of lions and one of the predatory wasp species. Esoteric stuff. A study that provided a comfortable living and yielded information. Lions were just the food providers for his wasps, who laid their eggs in the larvae of a biting fly that pestered the lions. And the wasps were just a day job, a means to an income. He'd study whatever he was paid to study. She sighed. "Come have some breakfast with me, eh? I found a fresh guinea hen nest yesterday."

She soft-boiled the milk, tan eggs and they ate them together as she listened to him prattle on about his wasp collecting, larvae counts, population fluctuations. When he left on his skimmer, with his collecting nets, sample bags, and a stunner, Tahira stripped and scrubbed herself clean of last night's sweat and the smell of violent death. She stripped the bed, tossed the dirty sheets into the sonic cleaner, and padded barefoot, in a clean shift, to the lab refrigerator where she had stored the trespasser's bones. The bag containing the black shirt lay on the floor beside the refrigerator. She picked it up, smoothed out the torn and blood-stiffened fabric within its plastic shroud. *Why did you come here?* She spoke silently to the girl's spirit. *The lioness's killing was innocent. My killing of the lioness will not be innocent and it will be my burden, not yours.* Anger burned through her. "Your death was not innocent," she said aloud. "You brought it with you and left it like poison on innocent ground."

But her own words sounded hollow and that image nagged at her . . . the "where's my date?" body language, that single, decorative sandal tumbling through the air, bright against the stark night-vision landscape. Dropping the shirt, she took out the bag with the vertebrae and hair and got to work.

The first thing she did was file a full report to the local Sheriff's Department. That meant the media would have the news within the hour. The Sheriff's security leaked like a sieve. Next, she started the DNA scan. She was only required to run a minimal ID scan, but she did a full analysis. The longer she spent on this easily rationalized task, the longer she could put off the euthanasia. By noon, her back ached from standing and the building's major-domo announced Deputy Malthers. Shawn. He always handled Preserve issues. She sent the data to her personal workspace and shut down the lab, retreating into the main room and the cool breath of water wall. "Come

in." She admitted him and he sighed in the cool air, removing his hat, half moons of sweat darkening the tan sun-cloth of his uniform.

"Tahira." He nodded, his weathered face closed and cautious. "You had an intruder, huh?" Another one, his eyes accused. "Supposedly your fence is tight. Do I have to worry about lions in the hotel lobbies?"

"You know you don't, Shawn." Tahira studied the tight lines around his eyes. "The perimeter isn't porous—to animals. Who chewed on you?"

"My boss, the Sheriff. The governor chewed on him." He sighed and tossed his hat onto the corner of the table. "He's getting more pressure from the Take Back America people. They got the news even before the media could post it on the net. Can I have a glass of water?" He gave her a plaintive look. "I know you run a tight ship, Tahira, but jeeze, two deaths in two months? This is too good for the media to pass up. You should see the hit rates."

"Sit down. I'm sorry." She headed for the kitchen. "I didn't get much sleep. Did you get the DNA scan I sent your office?" She carried two full glasses and a pitcher of water back, set the tray on the low table near her work field.

"Yeah. No match." He took a glass, drank half of it in long, gulping swallows. Wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "She's not a missing person. I sent it to the national DNA database, but you know how long that takes." He rolled his eyes. "They've got a six month backlog and that's just on violent crime. I still haven't heard back on our first Jane Doe."

At least he had said "our," although technically, the Preserve was administered by the World Council and not under local jurisdiction. Still, the World Council liked to let local law deal with matters if at all possible. Tahira sat down on her cushion. The holo field shimmered to life and she opened the data file, staring thoughtfully as the letters, numbers, and icons winked like emerging stars.

"I know her." She spoke to the galaxy of numbers and icons—the translation of those rags of flesh and bits of bone. "She grew up in a slum." The heavy-metal load in her hair could only belong to a child of the uncleansed suburban wasteland. "She was very young, less than sixteen, I am guessing. European, probably Scotch-Irish, no Asian or African genes, minimum melanin." Her skin would have been very fair and the red in her hair was natural beneath its cheap dye. Poor all her life, considering the uncorrected genetic predisposition to cholesterol and cancer. She would not have had an uncomplicated middle age, if she had lived. She would have died young, relatively speaking. Unless she earned the money for genetic repair. "Look at this." She called up the security clip, ran it. Listened to Malthers' soft indrawn breath.

"She didn't expect lions." His face was grim. "And she sure didn't get lost from one of your tours, huh?"

"Nobody gets lost from our tours." Tahira shook her head. "And no, she did not expect lions."

"You got any ideas?"

"This cost a lot of money." She looked at him. "Hacking our security. It would be expensive. We do not use cheap security."

He was looking at her quizzically, his thick brows drawn down over those so very blue eyes.

"Some things," she said slowly, remembering, "Don't change."

"Like what?"

Her link chimed. "I have a tour scheduled." She stood, feeling age in her bones, even though they worked perfectly, leveraging her young-muscled body erect. As if invisible teleomeres were shortening, ticking like a clock. "I have to go. If I find anything out, I will email you."

He headed for the door, paused to look back. "Stop by the office." Those so blue eyes

fixed on her face. "I'll buy you a beer." The door closed behind him, breathing hot dust into the room.

The tour was an expensive one, which was why she had to lead it. It would be a package with a hotel, maybe a body-spa, the Preserve and a tour conducted personally by the Manager. That was her. Her contract specified how many of these she had to do each month. Originally, Carlo had suggested she wear native dress. When she had told him that would be a ragged T-shirt with the name of a football team on it, he had shut up and not mentioned it again. The tourists were waiting beside their air-conditioned tour bus, looking around at the dusty little compound, pointing their links at the buildings, the guinea hens scratching in the shade. The link videoed the image and instantly searched the web for a match, downloading informational links. The life cycle of the guinea hen, the history of the Preserve, the blueprints for the buildings, if you wanted to look at them. Their tour guide spotted her and said something. Instantly they all, nearly in unison, pointed their links at her.

A part of her wanted to duck, as if they were pointing weapons. The gesture was, her hind brain told her, the same. Was it, she wondered briefly, that this pointing of links to acquire information was a hostile act? Or was it that the men who had fired on the refugees when she was a child hadn't been hostile, had treated the dealing of death as casually as these tourists treated the gathering of information? She didn't know, hid her flinch, and smiled for them as the guide did the introduction that they weren't listening to. Their eyes were on their links as she downloaded onto their screens life and death, love and loss, success and failure, rendered in text and images. She climbed onto the bus after them, took the plush seat up front, facing them. The guide sat beside her in the other rear-facing seat. Some of the tourists were from off-planet, perhaps one of the orbital platforms or perhaps even Mars. They had brown skin, lighter than her Lesotho skin, but their bodies seemed frail, out of proportion. They looked at her, eyes bright.

They did not look quite human.

"Go straight out of the compound and take the first right," she told the driver, who was a regular. "We'll take the road down along the river."

"We're here to see the mastodon calves." One of the off-planet tourists looked up from her link. "The park map IDs them to the west, over in the hills."

"The old cow always brings them down to their favorite place on the river at dusk, to drink." Tahira spoke patiently. "You'll have time to stretch your legs and have some dinner before they show up."

"Why don't we just go where they are?" Someone else spoke up.

"Our rhythms are more flexible than those of the animals." She kept her voice patient. "They know we will be there at the river, we are usually there, that does not bother them. It is familiar. If we arrive unexpectedly in an unusual place . . . they will be bothered. And that is unhealthy."

That didn't satisfy all of them, but she didn't expect it to.

"Hey." A woman with a very young face, golden skin, and hair as silvery white as Jen looked up from her screen. "I just got a newsfeed . . . a tourist got killed by a lion! Last night! This is the second lion kill!"

Murmurs swept the bus and all eyes focused on the link screens.

"It wasn't a tourist." Her words fell like stones into the murmur and eyes pried themselves from link screens. "A young woman was dropped from a hovercraft for the lions to find." She spoke into silence now. All eyes were on her and somehow, this felt no different than the pointed links. "She was intended to die. Someone videoed her death. That person will sell the video for a lot of money. Violent death is very valuable. It is an ugly trade." Only the purr of the bus's power plant could be heard

now. "But it is a very old trade. No matter. I saw the vehicle that brought her, I saw the person who operated it. I observe that lion pride every night and I was there in the darkness. He will be caught."

"That's not on the newsfeed." The accusatory voice came from the rear of the bus. From one of the off-worlders. Tahira shrugged. "I did not tell the media this. But you are safe." Her smile was genuine this time. "The lion pride does not water where we will be. This is not their territory."

She wasn't sure if they were relieved or disappointed. She cut off their questions by launching into her usual lecture, pointing out the changing ecosystem—it had not reached full climax equilibrium yet—directing their links to the coy-dog family holed up in the shade, waiting the cool of evening. The puppies were playing a game of tug with a scrap of dirty hide and links bristled, zooming in to record. The larger animals were all chipped so the links would offer up the ID information for each animal, their stage of development toward the Pleistocene ideal as the engineers evolved them into their own ancestors.

Voyeurs, she thought as they pointed and murmured. An observable reality, but not personal. Not threatening.

She politely refused to say any more about the death, telling them only that the authorities would handle it. The tourists were distracted by the smaller horse herd. One of the young stallions had been challenging the herd sire over the past few weeks and he chose this day to take his challenge to a new level. Dust rose in tan clouds as the two horses circled and feinted, ears flat, striking snake-like for a bite, whirling to kick. This time, the youngster wasn't backing down and the two stallions rose, chest to chest, teeth bared. "These horses are very much like the *Equus verae*, the horses that grazed this plain a million years ago. If you'll put on your glasses, you'll be able to identify the young male." She paused while the tourists all fumbled for the glasses they'd been given at the start. They were slaved to hers. She IDed the young male by chip number and a green halo instantly surrounded him. "This young stallion was foaled four years ago in the spring. The engineers believe that he is a good likeness of the original *Equus verae*. All the stock began with Przewalski's Horse, the last truly wild horse species." They were all watching now, as the stallions shouldered and circled, wheeling to kick, or rearing to feint and bite at each other's faces. Tahira stifled a sigh. "The herd sire is nearly ten years old. That's a long life for a herd sire." The young challenger had been born of artificial insemination with the new, improved genes. If the old herd sire didn't get ousted soon, she'd have to help a new challenger along. "This is not reality," she murmured. "It is our version of reality."

"Pardon?" One of the off-worlders had moved to the front of the bus for a better look, was pointing his link at the fight, recording.

"Nothing." She shook her head. "I was just talking to myself."

"It's so . . . uncontrolled." He had friendly dark eyes and a wide smile that made his too-fragile body seem less *different*. "Hard to imagine living in a world this . . . chaotic."

"It's not chaotic," she said softly. "Only humans are chaotic."

The horses saved her from the questions surfacing in his eyes. The young stallion whirled as the herd sire struck and his heels caught the herd sire full in the face. They heard the thud of hoof on bone, even at this distance, and the sire went down in a cloud of dust. He struggled instantly to his feet, but his jaw looked twisted and blood darkened the dun hide. A low murmur of horror washed through the bus.

"What now?" The white-haired woman's voice rose over the babble. "What will happen now?"

"This was an accident. Fights like this rarely result in serious injury." Tahira

blocked the tourist glasses, but had her own zoom in on the injured stallion. No point in showing them the bloody details up close. The youngster had run him a few meters from the mares and now trotted back and forth, tossing his head, tail erect as the ousted sire stood with head drooping. She winced at the white gleam of either bone or teeth visible in the bloody mess of his face. Violence seemed to be gathering over the Preserve like a dark cloud. "His jaw is broken." She didn't need the text diagnosis scrolling across the visual field. "He won't be able to eat. The lions will probably kill him, or even the wild dogs. This coy-dog is heavier than the old North American coyotes and they hunt in small packs. They occasionally kill large prey species, mostly when the animal is weak or crippled."

"Why don't you do something about it?" A woman spoke up, her voice shrill. "You could take him in and heal him, right?"

"And what will the lions eat tonight?" Tahira faced the woman, watched horror and anger ripple across her features. "These are not our rules. They are much older than us," she said gently. "That is what the Preserve is all about . . . returning to the old rules. Without the horse, a lion cub may die because of insufficient nutrition." She waited for the horrified comments to ebb. You could hear the excitement beneath the horror. Now they had a prize in the video files they'd just uploaded to their personal space—something to show proudly to friends, so they could commiserate over that raw moment of blood, and pain, and imminent death. The woman who had spoken up wasn't satisfied. She was talking about cruelty and emails to powerful people.

"Did you make this happen for us?" The off-worlder was looking at her, and his eyes were shocked and cold.

"No." She met those eyes, saw her own reflection in them, tiny and perfect. "But I knew the old stallion would be forced out sooner or later. The horses decided to make it happen now. The kick was a freak accident. Horses are good at dodging."

He didn't believe her. You cannot conceive of no control, she thought. And wondered suddenly if her daughter had gone off-planet. The Council Security Forces were everywhere. She had never thought of that before, and it chilled her, she was not quite sure why. Her daughter would be much older than this man, now.

They moved on and the tour guide, a seasoned professional, texted her a request to show them something to change the now-soured mood. She had anticipated this and had already called up her inventory. "Turn left just past that clump of willow . . . yes, there."

The bus took the dirt track easily, its off-road suspension barely sloshing the drinks that the attendant was handing out. "The engineers have had excellent success with the long horned bison. They are very like the bison that grazed this plain during the Pleistocene. Three cows have calved this month and the latest was last night." She scanned for the IDs, found the three cows in close proximity two hundred meters from the road. "They're out in the grass, so we can watch them without disturbing them. If you'll look through the left windows and follow the arrow directions on your glasses, they'll direct you to the calves." A green arrow winked on her glasses, pointing to the right, and as she turned her head, it was replaced by one pointing straight up. She lifted her head, and there, in the distance, she spied the small black dots that were the grazing bison. The bus had come to a halt. "Have you all found the bison?" She waited while the slow ones fumbled their way to the bison herd. Zoom while they were panning and they'd get sick every time. "Okay, here we go." The field blurred and suddenly seemed to be rushing toward her. The tiny specks enlarged, became a dozen shaggy brown beasts with their noses in the sun-burned grass, backs dotted with cowbirds. Small white herons stalked among them, snatching up beetles and the occasional rodent stirred up by the bison's hooves. Their long horns gleamed in the sun as they tossed their heads at flies.

The newborn calf hugged his mother's flank, his horns mere bumps. He suddenly butted beneath her flank, tail wriggling as he nursed. The collective sigh from the tourists made the guide breathe his own sigh of relief, she noted. Well, upset guests would hardly give him a fat tip. She let them watch the two older calves butt heads and the herd even obliged by grazing closer to the bus. By the time they moved on to the elephant watching spot for cocktails and their gourmet dinner, the mood was festive once more, the injured stallion forgotten.

Tomorrow, she would go check on him. Assure herself that the predators had found him. Injured as he was, the dog pack that patrolled that territory would almost certainly take him, but perhaps not right away. She called up that sector, scanned the predator inventory. To her relief, the lions were headed in that direction. They should get to him quickly.

During dinner they lucked out. A scimitar cat—quite shy and a rare sighting—chose that night to come down to the river to drink. The tourists flocked to the windows, their links pointing as they videoed in night mode. The elephants showed on time and the new mastodon type calf went so far as to walk nearly up to the bus, trunk lifted in curiosity, before his mother shooed him nervously away, and stomped a threat toward them, her ears erect, trunk curled back like a cobra.

The tour guide looked pleased, as if Tahira had orchestrated the whole show. Tahira sat back in her seat as they returned to the compound in the gathering darkness, answering questions, giving small lectures on the history of the Preserve, the geneticists' work, the effect of the huge preserve areas on climate stability. They asked occasional questions about the injured stallion.

No one brought up the dead girl. Not one.

She climbed down from the bus into the cooling night beneath the white arch of the Milky Way and a sliver of new moon. They would go back to the comfort of the resort to have dessert and drinks and to compare video clips. The tour guide gave her a wide grin and a wave as the door closed, anticipating good tips, obviously.

Jen would have left for the day and she would have the place to herself.

You have a visitor, the door murmured as she reached the verandah. *He had an official security pass to enter. His personal ID is blocked.* "I know who it is." She sighed, then straightened her shoulders. "Open."

"What the hell is going on, Tahira?" Deputy Malthers levered himself up from the sofa in the main room. "Do you know just how much trouble you're going to cause me when my boss starts getting the feeds?"

"He has his link shut off tonight? I would have thought he'd have the news already." She headed for the kitchen wall, thirsty. "And if I protest your use of a security pass to override my door lock, I hope you can produce the warrant." She closed her eyes as he seized her arm. Halted. "Shawn . . . I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" He spun her around to face him, his face pale. "You withheld information from me? You lied to me about that girl's death? And then you spill it to a bunch of tourists?" His nostrils were pinched. "You'd damn well better be sorry."

Some of them had certainly blogged from the bus. She had counted on that. She met his eyes. "I did not lie to you."

"Then why did you tell them . . ." His eyes narrowed and he let go of her arm. "No way. No way you do that."

"Do what?" She widened her eyes. "If I tell a story to tourists to enliven their trip and they exaggerate it in their personal blogs, this is not a crime. Your boss can deny whatever he wishes to deny and if the outcry is loud enough, my boss will probably fire me. Would you like some water?"

"What do you think you're going to do?" His voice was harsh.

"Go to bed." She filled a glass from the refrigerator tap, filled a second glass.

"I'm going to get a warrant for your arrest." He ignored the proffered glass.

"On what grounds?" She raised an eyebrow. "I suspect your boss will not agree with you. It will be hard enough to deal with the media when they get hold of the tourists' mistaken statements. It will be much worse if you have arrested the manager of the Preserve and then have to release her. Your boss is very conscious of his media image."

"I'm staying here tonight." He glared at her.

"Be my guest." She shrugged. "I told you, I'm going to bed."

"Good." He stretched out on the sofa, his jaw set.

She turned her back on him and activated her holo-field. Checked the Preserve first. Minor perimeter alerts only—a couple of licensed backcountry backpackers who had retreated when they triggered the broadcast security announcement, a small herd of pronghorn that moved off when the repulsion field activated, broadcasting an unpleasant sonic pulse that discouraged most wild life and the occasional lost livestock. Nothing else. Red icons signaled stationary chips—indicating that a bearer hadn't moved for twelve hours. That usually represented death or serious injury. She checked the IDs . . . all prey species except for one elephant from the northernmost herd. An old female, but not so old that she should be dying yet. The elephants and the larger predators had been implanted with biometric chips. Tahira checked it, found signs of physical distress, but no clear diagnosis. She transferred the ID to her link. She'd fly over in the morning and check on it, on her rounds to chip new births. See what had happened.

Her AI search of the Security video of the running girl had turned up a match. Eighty-nine percent. Tahira drew a deep breath, touched the green icon. A merchant site. Models? A naked woman lounged suggestively on a grizzly's hide, caressing the dead, snarling face, tongue-tip peeking pink from lush, crimson lips. The secure interface requested a user ID and password. And a credit card. The entry fee made her purse her lips. She flagged the link, emailed it.

Malthers was peering at his link, his feet propped on the arm of the sofa. He looked up as she shut down her field. "What if the person who dropped her was a woman?" His eyes were hard.

She shrugged. "You are too tall for that sofa. Would you like me to inflate the guest bed?"

"No, thank you." He went back to his link. "I don't plan on sleeping."

"While you are up, then, maybe you can see what's for sale on the video sex markets. I just sent you a link that you might . . . find interesting. I don't have the budget to access it." She turned and went into her room. When she woke briefly in the middle of the night, the light in the main room was still on and he was sitting on the sofa, hunched over his link.

She slept without dreaming, after that, and when she woke, he was gone.

The door seal sighed as it released and Jen strode in, bringing a smell of hot noon-time dust and heat, a hint of lion and sex. "Hey, how was your tour last night? Did they do a fancy spread?" He came up behind her, dropped his collecting bag onto the tiles with a small thump. "What's with the reporters outside? The newsfeeds were full of the killing this morning. You were a witness? To the girl's death?" His sandy brows arched over his pale eyes. "You didn't tell me that."

"I know I didn't." Tahira waved her hand through the field and the numbers and icons, the map of this girl's history written in molecules, winked out. "Let's not talk about it, okay?"

"You haven't opened your secure email from the boss yet."

"I know what it says." She sighed.

"Tahira . . ." His hands came to rest lightly on her shoulders. "I work with the lions, too. I can do this euthanasia for you. You don't have to. Just give me the chip ID."

His hands offered comfort, not sex. She let her shoulders relax a bit beneath the warmth and acknowledged the small heat of desire between her legs. He was very pretty. He would try hard to please her in bed. Her shiver of anticipation made her . . . sad. She was old enough to be his grandmother. The flesh had its own morality. She sighed, and his hands slid from her shoulders as she rose. "I appreciate your offer." She smiled for him. "But it is my duty. It is my failing that the girl was able to be here."

"That's not true." He shook his head, frowning. "She bought hackware good enough to get through the perimeter sensors. It's happened before. Remember those rich kids that came in here with a rifle? Right after I started working here? The ones who thought they were going to kill an elephant? That's not your responsibility—that's the responsibility of the company that contracts security to the Preserve."

"That's not what happened." Tahira blanked the icons with a wave of her hand. "This is not like those teenage poachers with their utterly inadequate rifles. I knew they were there."

"So her hackware was better, that's all." Jen shrugged. "Come on, Tahira. Nobody is blaming you . . . except you."

"I doubt that is true." She turned to meet his pale eyes. "Her mother? A lover? Who is mourning her? She was a girl, Jen, even if nobody claimed her as missing. The poor don't bother. You know that no one will really look. You know where they have gone." She turned away from the blue incomprehension of his eyes. "But they are blaming me. Besides, she was not rich enough to afford that level of hackware."

He shook his head and heaved a sigh for her to hear. She ignored it as she ran through the surveillance program, suppressing a twinge of guilt because she hadn't yet checked on the stationary elephant cow. Everything was fine, although the main horse herd was pushing into the grazing territory of the old mare's small, splinter herd. This was a dry year and the grass was poor. She'd have to let them get pushed off their riverside pasture. That would weaken this year's crop of still-nursing foals, and increase the kill rate by the northern pride. If another dry spring followed, she thought, the small herd would probably end up being absorbed back into the larger group. The old mare wouldn't survive that merger.

The guide reports were routine. No problems, no accidents on any of the daily motorized tours currently winding through the Preserve, and only a sprained ankle from one of the self-guided backpacking treks that were in progress. The hiker had been handled by a contracted first-aid skimmer and planned to continue the trek in an augmented cast, having signed a health waiver. Tahira checked the location of the various lion prides and elephant groups to make sure that the guides would provide visual contact for the guests. Four were lion treks and one was an elephant trek. But all their guides were experienced and they could find the chip signatures with their own software. They were all on target to give the paying hikers the thrill of a live sighting. Routine day. She retined the report, packed a few necessary items into her field bag, then left Jen to his microscope and took the skimmer out into the Preserve.

Shawn had not gotten his warrant, but then she had known he would fail.

She swung north, to check up on the stationary elephant before she started her chip work. It was a long flight, clear to the northwestern boundary of the Preserve, within sight of the monorail. The old cow was down after all, on her side in the shade of a thin copse of trees. She raised her head as Tahira skimmed over, ears erect, trunk curled as she got her forefeet under her, tried to heave herself to her feet. Two aunties had stayed with her and as she collapsed into the dust once more, they hurried up, stroking her with their trunks, watching Tahira warily as she landed the skimmer and approached cautiously. The dust beneath the old cow's hindquarters

had turned to mud from her urine. No sign of defecation. A blockage? Perhaps she had eaten something that damaged her gastrointestinal system. Her temperature was slightly elevated and when Tahira zoomed in with her glasses, sure enough the cow's membranes looked pale. No sign of any external trauma. *Natural causes*. She selected the diagnosis, uploaded visuals to the cow's file, and set it to alert her when vitals fell to imminent death levels. She would return to make a more complete diagnosis then. For the record.

She caught a glimpse of movement from the corner of her eye as she removed her glasses. Bear? Sure enough, when she slipped them back on, a green ring haloed the bushes where she had seen the movement and the ID appeared. One of the Short Faced bears, another of the engineers' triumphant recreations. They were drawn by death. One of the aunties blew noisily and rushed the bushes, trunk high. The bear retreated, growling, circled around to windward. Tahira retreated to her skimmer, although the bear was focused on the dying cow. Unlikely that the aunties would allow it to hasten the old cow's end.

Natural causes, she thought as she lifted to swing eastward again. You could label the girl's death as natural causes. To the lions it had been a natural end. The monorail was curving along the white arch of track on its first run of the morning. In a few moments the tourists would surely spot the cow and the questions would start pouring into Admin from the passengers. All the tourist monorails carried a direct link to Preserve Administration. Tahira set the skimmer on auto, homing in on the ID of the bison herd she needed to chip, and quickly edited out an image of the cow and her aunties from the old cow's ID file. She selected one of her taken in the past, with her last calf, set her link to record and smiled for the tourists. Quickly, in a warm and positive tone, she explained the situation, that the cow as dying of natural causes, the aunties were attending her, and that this (insert mother and calf image here) was part of the natural cycle of life and death, that the old cow's flesh would nourish wild dog cubs (she called up a file, inserted a recent shot of three pups playing) and the scavenger population. She uploaded the video file to Administration and texted Amy Shen, the head of PR, to expect questions about the dying cow and offer this Special Message from the Manager. Amy would run the file through her editing software to smooth out any rough edges and in a few minutes, when the worried texts came in, the tourists would have her reassuring explanation.

Maybe she should have made one for the dead girl? Tahira kicked the skimmer to full speed, ducked down behind the windshield as they streaked across the foothills of the mountains.

It took her the rest of the day to chip the bison calves and stalk a litter of wild dog pups old enough for chips. Half grown, they were skittish, full of hormones and already squabbling with the ranking alphas. But she finally got good shots, and planted a chip in a solid muscle mass. The new ID files opened and she recorded the pertinent data. Now the pups and the calves were part of the database. Their deaths would have meaning, value, would contribute to the slowly growing mass of information about this stable environment.

What had the girl's death contributed?

A meal for the lions, she thought. At a price.

It was getting dark. She texted Jen that she was going to stay out and check on the lion pride before she came in. Told him to go home, activate security when he left, she'd see him tomorrow. She knew where the pride would be, didn't need to check her link. It was too early yet for them to head down to the river. She grounded the skimmer, ate an energy bar from her bag, drank some water, and used her link to access the Preserve database and check on the animals.

Nothing out of the ordinary. No security alerts, nothing but the normal rhythms of

day ending and night beginning. Shift change, she thought as she stuffed the wrapper into her pocket and capped her water bottle. Time. It was fully dark now, the Milky Way a white shimmer across the star-spangled sky. She stared up at it. Different sky than the one over the refugee camp. Maybe it wasn't, but it looked different. She frowned, bothered suddenly that she didn't know if the constellations had been the same in that girlhood sky, or if memory had warped the images in her mind. It bothered her a lot. Frowning, she lifted the skimmer, donned her glasses set to night vision, and went looking for the lion pride. She flew low, skimming above the brush, weaving around the trees. Someone watching for her might think she was checking on the wildlife, scanning chips. She dipped south so that she'd meet the pride on their way down to the river.

Red blossomed at the top of her glasses' heads-up visual field. Perimeter violation? Tahira's stomach clenched. Why an alert this time? She crouched behind the windshield as she dropped lower, weaving through the tops of the trees. A map flashed into existence now, red dots marking the path of the intruder as he activated the sensors scattered across the Preserve. Tahira watched another red icon blossom on the screen map. He was heading for the place where the girl had died, and the steady progress suggested that he wasn't trying very hard to hide and certainly wasn't using hackware.

No. This was just some fool who chose tonight to violate the Perimeter. An idiot. A thrill seeker. Furious, she circled south to come in straight behind the intruder, slowed the skimmer to its limit, weaving through the brush now, twigs whispering against the skimmer's flanks, clawing at her legs. She was briefly thankful for her tough, suncloth pants that resisted the thorns. She followed the trespasser's path on her map. He should be about a hundred yards ahead, almost at the site where the girl had died.

Something slammed into her, an invisible fist that loosened her grasp on the skimmer's nav bar and tossed her sideways out of the seat. The skimmer compensated as soon as her hand left the bar, shying sideways to stay underneath her, slowing and settling automatically. She clutched at the bar to take control again, but her right arm didn't work and before she could process that, shift to her left hand, the skimmer grounded gently. For a moment, Tahira stared at the bar, then realized that her sleeve was wet, warm liquid was dripping steadily onto her pants and the dusty ground beside the skimmer. Dark. Blood. Her head spun briefly and she swallowed dry nausea.

What do you think you're going to do? She heard Shawn's furious voice in her head. Not much. She climbed off the skimmer, her knees suddenly shaky.

"I don't want to kill you." The hard, cold voice came from the tall hawthorn scrub that edged the grassy area where the skimmer had come down. "But you're not going to get in my way. You can yell for help as soon as I'm done here."

"Did you bring another one to die?" Tahira faced the voice. She was still wearing her glasses, but they didn't register an ID. No surprise. Anyone doing this would have had his ID chip removed long ago, would use temporary, fake chips. "How much do you get for these? And what do the girls think? That this is just another porn shot, this time out in the dust? She didn't expect the lions."

"What the hell are you talking about?" A figure emerged from the concealing hawthorn. Tall. Dressed in chameleon-fabric so that his silhouette was hard to make out. The projectile rifle, night-scoped, ugly, and efficient looking wasn't hard to make out at all. Something about the voice was wrong, nagged at her, but her head was full of sticky glue and she couldn't think of what it was.

"I asked you a question." The voice grated at her ears.

"You're the one who's making the snuff vids, recording the girls as they run into the old lioness's pride and die." She would have spat the words, but that sense of *wrong* was building in her head.

The figure stepped forward suddenly and before Tahira's gone-fuzzy reflexes could kick in, had shoved Tahira back against the skimmer, her back arched under the pressure of the trespasser's body, her good arm bent behind her. She blinked into pale gray eyes in a hard, weathered face framed by cropped-short gray-white hair. Sucked in a breath that was half pain, half surprise.

A woman.

"Shawn said it might be a she." She laughed, drunk on the pain that had begun to throb in her right shoulder and side, burning like a growing fire, radiating through her flesh.

"Yeah, I'm a she. That was my daughter your lions ate. You folks don't care, but I do." Her breath blasted Tahira's face. "They're going to pay for that tonight."

"Your daughter?" Tahira blinked, trying to focus her eyes. "That's why your hackware is so poor? You just walked in here to shoot lions? You don't care if we catch you?"

"I don't care one bit." The cold pale eyes bored into hers. "If you hadn't decided to hang out and protect them, I wouldn't have had to shoot you. I figured you folks trust your software instead of using your eyes. I know how tracking software works . . . it's pretty easy to fool if you know how." She laughed and the sound was like glass breaking. "I was a wild-meat-hunter for the black market—when there was still wild meat to hunt. I know all about tracking software. Maybe the people who babble about karmic balance are right, eh?" The shattered laugh came again. "After all the animals I killed, one of them killed my daughter. But the score is going to end in my favor."

"You fool." Tahira twisted her hand free, planted it against the woman's chest and shoved. Her strength surprised both of them and the woman stumbled back a step. "You've ruined this night. You've ruined my chance to catch the one who killed your daughter and the girl he killed before her. You and your misguided revenge. He's not going to come back, not after he realizes people were here waiting for him. *Damn* you."

"What the crap are you talking about?"

"I'm not talking any crap." Tahira closed her eyes. Game over, she thought. "How do you even know that your daughter was the girl who was killed here? We haven't identified the DNA yet."

"I found the image on the web." The woman's voice grated, harsh as stone. "I was looking for her, used a video search engine, uploaded a bunch of recent pictures of her. And the engine found a match. With lions." She spat. "One of your tourists videoed it. Her running. The lions after her." She spat again. "And you people just stood around."

"No one stood around. I saw that video." Tahira stood still as the gun muzzle lifted, fixed on her chest.

"The media said she sneaked in. I figured she was showing off to prove something . . . because I used to run around in the African wastelands for the meat collectors. She was such a city kid." For a moment her voice wavered. Then it went cold again. "You want to tell me your version?"

"You didn't look back to check the source of that image match, did you? If you want to go check it, you'll find it's a teaser for a very expensive, password-only, porn site. I think your daughter believed she was making a porn vid. Right until the end." Tahira pulled out her link, watched the gun muzzle lift and steady. Touched up the video file from the security eye, passed it over.

The woman took it, poised, the gun ready. Yes, Tahira thought. She had the body language of one who expected attack. She remembered that body posture all too well. The woman stepped back, out of range, looked at the link with one eye on Tahira. Then her posture stiffened and the link held her full attention.

I could kill her now, Tahira thought. Our children are our greatest weakness. She waited, watching the sky, straining her ears to hear any whisper of a silenced skimmer.

The woman must be reviewing the clip over and over again. Finally she looked up, pocketed the link. The gun muzzle had sunk to rest on the ground and she didn't lift it.

"What's your stake in this?" Her voice was steady. "You came out here to put your life on the line for a damn lion?"

"No . . . and yes." Tahira closed her eyes again, briefly, summoning the will to push the grinding pain in her shoulder down deeper inside her. "The lioness . . . the old one, the one that killed your daughter . . . was wild caught. There are no more lions to catch. These are being changed, their genes altered to make them what we want . . . the Pleistocene American Lion. The world that the lioness came from is gone. My world. Your world, too, I think." She pulled her lips back from her teeth. "She is innocent of murder the way your rifle is innocent of murder, even if you point it at me and pull the trigger. You and I . . ." Her lips stretched tighter. "We are not innocent of our daughters' murders." She watched the gun muzzle jerk upward, tensed for one second as it wavered, drifted lower. "My elder daughter did what your daughter did." The entire Preserve seemed to be holding its breath. Even the insects had hushed. "I knew what she was doing and pretended I did not. She had no future, there was no aid, everyone was hungry. I took the flour and oil she brought home and I did not ask where the money came from." She did not look away from the pale oval of the woman's face. "They made a video of her death. I got someone to find it for me eventually. To buy it. Her death was a commodity, for sale on the market. As is your daughter's." She waited for the gun to come up but it did not.

"My younger daughter was six." She said the words flatly, without inflection. "I sold her to the World Council Forces so that she would not have to do what her sister did. They call it sponsoring, but when you do that, you relinquish all rights to that child. Later, I paid a lot of money to find out where she was and when she was fourteen, I saw her. On a training mission, doing crowd control. She looked at me." Tahira took a deep breath. "She did not know me. By then, I had been lucky, had found a job with the North American Pleistocene Preserve and my superiors found that I was . . . talented. That was many years ago. My daughter is past middle age now." She glanced up as a tiny chime sounded from the skimmer. "That is our lioness and her pride." She took a deep breath. "This is a delicately balanced trap."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I think it's too late." She sighed. "He will certainly be scanning the ground for any human-sized life signatures, in case this is the trap he expects and I have brought the police."

"He won't see me." The woman laughed her broken-glass laugh. "Illegal technology is always a step ahead of legal. Your motion detectors saw me, but you wouldn't have picked me up on your scan."

"He has inside help and so he might have access to our entire security network." She shrugged. "I do not think that is likely since only I have complete access to it, but it is possible."

"In that case we're screwed." The woman shrugged, her expression unreadable in the dark. "What do I do?"

"I want him on the ground." Tahira closed her eyes as the world wavered. "He thinks I'm a witness and he needs to make sure I'm dead. I have a first aid kit behind the seat." Cold sweat bathed her face, prickling under her arms. "It has a touch menu. Select stimulant, human, emergency, and get two patches." She struggled to hang onto consciousness, eyes closed, nausea wringing her stomach. The woman brushed against her, fumbling behind the seat. A moment later cool fingers seized her wrist, pushed her sleeve up, and Tahira felt the sting of the stim patch on the inside of her elbow.

"That's going to make you bleed more."

"I know." Tahira straightened as energy washed through her, banishing the nausea, brightening the shadows. "Can't be helped." She touched the first aid menu, selected one small and one medium blood-stop patch. "Help me with the shirt." She winced as the woman opened the front, pulled the fabric down over her shoulder and arm. "Cover the entire wound, use the small one on the entry . . ."

"I know how to use a patch."

Tahira sighed as the woman smoothed the patches over the ruin of the entry and exit wounds. The fast-acting local quickly numbed the grinding pain, reduced it to a low-level throb that she could shut out for now.

"You guys carry a hospital on these things."

"We permit a few extreme hikers." Tahira drew a slow breath, let it out, judging the strength of the remaining pain. "We are preoccupied with death." She bared her teeth at the woman. "You sold vids of your kills along with your illegal meat, didn't you?"

The woman didn't answer, but, of course, she did. Tahira straightened. That was the lure of what would otherwise be no different from a farm or vat raised steak. If you couldn't pull the trigger yourself, you could still watch it die. "You hide," she said. "I'm going to move the skimmer ahead of the pride, ground it again. He's going to come down and look for me."

"He's going to drop a grenade on you and leave." The woman sounded contemptuous.

"Oh no." Tahira grinned. "Like you, I'm wearing a chameleon field. And I also have a small device that a clever grad student hacked up—it generates the thermal effect of a 150 pound antelope. He was studying night hunting, trying to determine the importance of scent, thermal detection, sound, and sight in predator species. Our killer should think it's me." She shrugged. "He has been very careful not to leave any traces. I suspect that if I did not patrol as regularly as I do, we would never have known that anyone was killed here." Another few hours, and only the scrap of fabric would have marked that kill site. "One of us needs to kill him." She lifted her hand. "I would prefer that the lions do it."

"How do you know they can?"

Tahira shrugged her good shoulder. "I will make it possible. If they do not, you or I will do it." She pulled the highly illegal gun from her waistband, was impressed that the woman didn't flinch.

"You could have shot me. While I was . . . looking at the vid." For a moment, she was silent. "I like you." Her teeth flashed briefly. "You would have made a good meat-hunter."

"I think not." Tahira stretched her lips back from her teeth. "But I am not sure we are so different. You know to stay downwind from the pride? They're hunting."

"I know."

"I need my link." Tahira held out her hand. The woman glanced at it, shrugged, handed it over. Tahira nodded and climbed onto the skimmer, hoping he showed before the stim patch ran out. She wasn't sure she could tolerate a second dose. At least the bleeding seemed to have stopped. Lifting, she drifted ahead of the pride, watching her enviro-panel, reading wind, calculating distance and scent drift. Set the skimmer gently down, half hidden by hawthorn scrub. Just hidden enough, she hoped, to make him think that he might have missed her last time, when he dropped the girl. The meat-hunter's daughter.

Glancing at her watch, she planted the thick disk of the bio-signature generator in a clump of hawthorn and hiked downwind, zooming in on the spot with her glasses. She had keyed the link to the lioness's ID, figured she had about fifteen minutes before she'd need to return and move the skimmer. The lions knew her scent, so hopefully her presence wouldn't disturb their regular hunting routine.

Five minutes left. She started to get to her feet to relieve her thigh muscles, when

she caught the faintest whisper of disturbed air, like the wings of an owl. She froze, eyes fixed on the landscape beyond the grounded skimmer. A vague shape of matte black blocked her view of grass and shrubs. A military shadow field, of course.

She didn't see him get out of the shadowed skimmer, but of course, he would also be using a chameleon field. Sure enough, a clump of sun dried grass winked out for a moment, then reappeared. He knew where she was—or where he thought she was. He was being cautious.

She had not prayed to any gods for a long time. Not since she had handed over her young daughter to the World Council Force sponsorship coordinator. Gods were like lions, they belonged to the old world. But now she bent her head, prayed that those old, dying gods would gather wind, scent, instinct and make one thing right in the old way.

He did not fear the lions. She could see it in his preoccupied focus on the clump of brush where she had hidden the generator. They were just park amusements, useful as a movie prop, able to kill a helpless and unarmed girl. Not a threat to him. He had a gun, after all. She bared her teeth at his hubris. It would please the old gods.

The lioness charged in a rush of motion where no motion had existed. The man spun, hand coming up. Light flared and the lioness tumbled, regained her feet in an instant and with a leap, her front feet hit his shoulders, knocking him flat, her claws digging in to hold him. He had time for a choked cry before her jaws closed on his throat. A second lioness charged in, taking him by the thigh. Dust rose, white in her night-vision, as he thrashed, strangling slowly. The lion grunts and chesty growls were the only sound. The other members of the pride had circled in, tearing his belly open before he had quite died.

Tahira started as something moved beside her. The meat-hunter squatted silently next to her, her posture intent, not speaking. A loop of intestine gleamed wetly. He had stopped struggling, had finally died. The lioness who had taken him stood up, bit at his dead shoulder and shook her head heavily. She walked a few steps away from the feeding pride, snarled as one of the males took a step toward her, lashed out at him. Her strike was weak, wobbly, and her hindquarters swayed as she staggered away from the others.

"She's dying," Tahira said softly. "He shot her." Her eyes widened as she noticed the faint striping on the lioness's shoulders. This was not the old one. This was one of the younger animals, the ones that were beginning to resemble their Pleistocene ancestors. She pointed her link at it. Yes, this was the oldest of the younger females, the one who had been pushing the old lioness of late. As she watched the pride feeding, she spotted the old lioness, noticed that she was limping. Not much, but it had been enough to let the beta lioness take over.

Perhaps the old mare had kicked her, when the pride had taken her foal. Tahira let her breath out slowly, pain beginning to seep through the stim's numbness. Maybe that limp would heal and the lioness would keep her rank now, maybe not. The next female in line was timid, not likely to challenge her soon.

She might keep her leadership.

For a time.

Tahira got to her feet, feeling shaky to her bones. "You should leave now. Take his skimmer. It got him through the boundary, it will take you out. Sell it quickly. Just in case. I will erase your entry from Security."

The meat-hunter faced her, her expression enigmatic, the years, the past, graven into her weathered face. "What about you?"

"I have some things to fix yet." She met the woman's eyes. They reminded her of African sky, blue, dry, and empty. "Your part is over."

For a moment the woman didn't move. Then she lifted a finger to her forehead in a

salute, turned and strode through the brush to the man's skimmer. A moment later it lifted and vanished.

The pride had settled down to serious feeding now and already the scavengers had begun to gather. One of the wild dogs darted in to snatch a scrap, then fled, butt tucked as a young male charged. She could come back in a couple of days, pick up any last evidence. Record the young lioness's death as an official euthanasia.

She limped to the skimmer, washed by waves of weakness, hoping she wouldn't fall off before she got back to Administration.

A red icon winked on the control panel. A security alert. Muttering a curse because she would have thought the meat-hunter was more careful than that, Tahira touched it.

Official intrusion with legal permission, contact estimate five minutes.

Tahira leaned against the skimmer and closed her eyes. Legal permission. He got his warrant after all? She waited for the whisper of the grounding skimmer.

"Tahira." Shawn's voice sounded harsh. "What the hell is going on? You've got lions right behind you. Eating something."

He was afraid. Her lips twitched and she almost smiled. "They're busy. They won't bother us. I think I need a ride." She forced her eyes open. "I'm not sure I can get the skimmer back on my own. Did you come to arrest me?"

"Damn right." He appeared beside her, watching the lions. "Hospital first, I think."

"That's probably a good idea." She forced herself straight, looked him in the face. "Did you access that link? Buy the video?"

"Yes." He looked briefly away.

"The man who dropped them here . . ." She pointed with her chin toward the lions. Mistake. The world began to turn slowly.

"You're sure?"

She couldn't read his expression. "Yes. Take this." She handed him the stunner from the skimmer. "I don't think the lions will bother me, but if one does, this will stop it." She walked away before he could react, circled around to reach the dead lioness, one eye on the feeding lions. They knew she was there, paid as little attention as they gave the coy-dogs that had gathered. She took the tissue sample quickly, dropped it into a collection bag and returned with the last ounce of her strength.

She was done. She let him take over, gave in and let the slowly turning landscape speed up until it swept her away. Was aware of jostling, a sense of speed, a low muttered monologue of cursing. Faded in and out of lights and bustle and the dim distant knowledge in the back of her brain that this must be the resort medical facility. Someone was arguing loudly, right over her. It hurt her head and she retreated into darkness.

When she opened her eyes it was light, daylight bright, and her mouth felt like a Preserve riverbed in a drought.

"They want you to drink this." Shawn leaned into view, holding a plastic squeeze-bag of yellow-green liquid with a drinking tube.

She sucked at the liquid, winced, and swallowed. There was no way to make electrolytes taste good.

"The bullet did a lot of soft tissue damage but missed anything important," he said mildly. "Made a big hole though. They left some drains in."

She peered at the bandages swathing her left arm. It didn't hurt, but that would probably change when the meds wore off. "Can I leave?"

"I think they'll let you go if you sign all kinds of waivers absolving them from blame."

"And do we go to jail from here?"

His eyes narrowed slightly. "That depends. We can talk about it."

He was right about waivers. She signed and retineaed a half dozen absolutions of all liability but finally they carted her to the entry in a motorized chair and let her escape. Shawn offered her his arm and she leaned on it. Harder than she thought she would need to. He was driving a small, rather scuffed up electric. His private car? "You're not on duty?" She realized he was wearing a casual sun shirt and khakis. "Your day off?"

"My day off." He slid into the driver's seat, touched on the air conditioning and sat there as the hot interior cooled. "Want to tell me?"

"And if I don't?"

He shrugged. Turned those dry, blue eyes on her. "I guess I could still arrest you on suspicion of being an accessory to a murder."

"I am that." And she told him, leaning back against the still-warm plastic of the seat as the car hummed to life and Shawn drove her back to the Preserve. She told him the whole story from her comments on the tour bus, to her ambush by the meat-hunter and the arrival of the vid maker.

He didn't say a word.

She finished as they entered the ornate gates of the Preserve and she closed her eyes, exhausted by the telling, her shoulder starting to hurt now with a muffled throb that promised worse to come.

"A meat-hunter." Shawn parked in the afternoon shade cast by the building's solar panels. "I'm surprised you don't want me to go after her."

"Why?" Tahira opened one eye. "Her world is as dead as mine is. There is no wild meat to hunt any more. Not the kind that made her a living."

"She could come back to poach."

"She won't."

"You are so sure."

"I am."

Shawn sighed. "So you've achieved your justice. The lions killed the man the same way they killed the girl. And now you want me to just walk away and call it over. Do you think that ends it, Tahira?"

The bitterness in his voice surprised her. "Of course that doesn't end it." She opened her eyes, faced him. "He was not the boss. He was simply a tool. It's way too big a business. I doubt it will ever end, Shawn." She opened the electric's door one-handed, amazed at how heavy it was. "Our species is addicted to death. And now, on the brink of conquering it, we love it even more." She pulled herself to her feet as he came around to help her and amazingly managed not to sway. "But *this* ends it here."

"Are you sure of that, too?"

"Yes." She looked him in the face. "I am."

He lifted his eyes, fixed them on the dry blue sky above. "Even if you die?"

"If I die, the information to end it here will come to you." She started for the entrance, judging the distance. Maybe too far. When he caught up to her, took her arm, she let him, leaned on him. He was angry, radiating like a range fire.

"I guess I'd just like to know who made you judge and jury."

The door scanned her hardware and opened, breathing cool air over them. The water wall filled the building with the scent of rain and she took a deep breath, happy in this single moment of sensation. "I appointed myself." She sank onto one of the floor cushions. "There is beer in the refrigerator. Why don't you bring us each one? Since you are not on duty?"

He did, handed her the tall glass, sat down across from her, his expression thoughtful. He was older than Jen, his face lined with his years of work. She studied the lines around his eyes, seeing the echoes of old laughter, of sorrow, of *life*.

"What does this Preserve mean to you?" He looked up suddenly.

She took a sip of her beer, relishing the cool, slightly bitter taste, the dewy chill of the glass against her lips. Life, she thought, is made up of moments. We simply fail to notice most of them. "I have asked myself that question for a long time." She studied the tiny, silver bubbles rising through the amber liquid. "I'm a lot older than you, Shawn. I'm a product of a world that is now dead."

"Africa," he murmured.

"Africa is a continent." She lifted her glass in his direction. "Lesotho. Once upon a time, long before you were born, my people raised and reintroduced lions to the dying plains. We had killed them all and now, many generations later, we brought them back. Only we didn't know the plains were dying, but they were. We, the Lesotho people, succeeded. For a while." She lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug. "But the plains died, then the lions died, and ultimately . . ." She drank more beer. "Lesotho died. Here . . . I found a trace of that dead world."

"The lions?" Shawn leaned forward, touched her hand lightly.

"Them, too." She tilted her head to study him, aware that she was getting drunk. "But it is not the world I knew. We did not care enough about that world to bring it back. Why not, Shawn?"

"No tourist value," he said softly.

"This world the engineers is creating is so old that it is new." She tried to smile, but it felt crooked. "The merely old has no value. Still . . . there are lions." She took another swallow of her beer. "And this is a refuge. From memory, if nothing else."

The entry chimed. "Hey, Tahira, you're back." Jen breezed through, bringing in the scent of dust and afternoon heat. "Hi, have we met?" He offered a hand to Shawn as he rose from the cushion. "I'm Jen, a grad student. I study bugs."

"Hi, Jen. I was just leaving." Shawn got to his feet, hesitated, then leaned down. "To memories." He touched his glass to hers.

She hesitated for a moment, met his eyes. Found . . . compassion there.

Jen looked from one to the other, puzzled, as they emptied their glasses. Shawn took them to the kitchen wall, lifted a hand to her, then left, the door whispering shut behind him.

"What was that all about?" Jen set his field pack against the wall.

"He was deciding whether or not to arrest me." Tahira watched Jen fill a glass of water. "I'd like some water, too, please."

"What's with the arrest thing?" He turned, smiling, a full glass in each hand. "And what happened to your arm? Did you have an accident with the skimmer?"

"Yes. I did." She took the glass. "Sit down, Jen."

He sat, the first tickle of alarm tightening the skin around his eyes before he quickly banished it with a smooth, careful smile.

"I have done a number of things in my long life." Tahira sipped her water. "One was computer security. I was very good. The systems these days are more advanced, but not excessively so."

"How interesting."

He was doing the facial expression well, but his body betrayed him, tension lifting his shoulders, straightening the curve of his spine. "Yes," she said. "So I was able to trace your alterations to the security platform." She raised her hand to silence him as he opened his mouth. "And I was also able to document the source of the security breach and ID you. It's documented, Jen. Archived in hard media to be released to the authorities either on my say-so, or upon my death."

"I . . . I didn't know . . . anyone was going to get killed." His face had gone white and in an instant, the planes and angles of maturity had softened to the rounded face of a child. "It . . . I was horrified. I didn't know . . . but they'd . . . I didn't dare say . . . I couldn't tell. . . ."

Was I ever a child like this? she wondered. She tried to remember. Didn't think so. Her older daughter had never been a child either. Not really. What about her younger daughter? Had they allowed her to be a child before she became a soldier? She hoped so. With all her heart. That was what I bought for you, she thought. Sighed. "You already knew that girl was dead when I first told you we'd had an intruder. Relax, Jen." She lifted her hand to silence him. "You are a pawn in this game. You will do one thing for me and then you are free to keep studying your bugs . . . although I suggest that you look into a transfer to another research program as quickly as you can engineer it." She studied his bowed head and hunched shoulders. "If something does happen to me, you will certainly be a suspect, so it might be unsafe for you to remain here."

"What do you want me to do?" he mumbled.

"You will run the DNA analysis on the bones that we found. I will give you a sample of lion DNA and you will make sure that you find that DNA associated with the dead girl. It may be there already. If it is not you will find it."

"That's all?" He raised his head, the fearful hope in his eyes painful to look at.

"That's all." You would not have survived in my world, she thought.

"I . . . I already put in a grant proposal." He looked away, swallowed. "I'd be doing it at the Antarctic preserve, looking at the symbiotic bacteria that still exist near the pole."

Ah, guilt. It would get him out of her sight quickly, at least. "Good." She nodded. "Here." She fumbled the collection bag from her coveralls. Handed it to him. The bit of flesh had turned brown and ugly. "This is your DNA."

He took it and fled. She suspected she wouldn't see him before he left—not if he could avoid it. Which suited her just fine.

The beer had given her energy, or maybe it had been the compassion in Shawn's eyes. She had not expected . . . understanding. But now, exhaustion was creeping through her. She opened her holo field and set it to secure, in case Jen was brave enough to return. She opened the camera control and set it to face view only. Her boss would not see her bandages.

Carlo answered quickly, seated in his teak and real-leather desk-recliner. "Did you get my messages?" He looked angry, his jet hair, usually immaculate, slightly mussed as if he had run his hand through it. "What is all this in the media? Tourists claiming that you were a witness to that intruder's death?"

"I have already informed the authorities that it was a mistake." She gave him a smooth smile. "The small brush fire of blogging will fade quickly."

"This is the last thing we need, Tahira." He scowled at her. "Such carelessness is unlike you. You know better than to do anything that will incite negative public attention. What were you thinking?"

"I needed to make myself bait," she said simply. "That was the surest and fastest method."

He was far more mature than Jen and his face betrayed nothing not even the tic of an eyelid gave him away. Almost, she could believe . . . "Our security is cutting edge. I sent you the inserted visuals that replaced the images of the girl's dying. Perhaps Jen was in a hurry." She shrugged. "But he had neither the access nor the expertise to allow an intruder to come and go through the security shield without triggering any alarm or record. The intruder had a password."

"How could someone have that?"

Almost she had believed that she had made a mistake, but his tone betrayed him. He was asking a rhetorical question. "Only two people have a password, Carlo. You and I. There is no real anonymity in the net. Not for a long time now." She smiled at him, pleasantly. "I do not believe you are one of the major players here. If I did . . ."

She bared her teeth at him. "I would not be talking to you. I think you merely . . . got a percentage. Rental. And perhaps a copy of the video? Does that excite you? A real and violent death, with real fear, and real blood?"

He flinched then, and her stomach twisted.

"That was how they came to ask you, wasn't it? You are a customer." She kept the disgust out of her voice, because it was not yet time to end this conversation. "I have archived a file of all my suspicions and all the evidence I have uncovered to support them. It is not sufficient to convict you. But it is sufficient to let those with greater investigative skills than I have find out the truth. Then *they* will convict you. On the day of my death, the archive goes to the appropriate World Council committee members."

"Blackmail?" His lip curled. "Is that so much better than what I did?"

"It's not blackmail." She shrugged. "It is simply an insurance policy. To make sure that this does not happen again here."

He didn't believe her.

"I am finishing up the DNA scan of the dead girl. I have already euthanized the lioness that attacked her. You may release that information to the media and the public. You may make whatever statement about blogger inaccuracies you choose and that will, as I said, fade away. If anything," her lip curled, "it will increase traffic to the Preserve. As you know, violent death is a potent pheromone."

His reaction was more visible this time.

She ended the link. Rudely.

She was entitled to be rude.

"He is too well protected." She was speaking to Shawn's absence, heard her own defensive tone. "He is insulated by too much money and too many connections. He would emerge from the ashes of an investigation and nothing would change." She closed down her field, got to her feet, feeling age in her flesh. How much longer did she have? "Perhaps I am too much a product of my old world. To me, justice is direct—an eye for an eye. The justice of the old gods. Of the lions."

She had bought the old lioness a second chance. It might not buy the lion much time at all, or she might get another season before she was ousted by one of the younger, striped, new females that made the gene engineers so happy. Tahira had a tour scheduled tomorrow. The note on the green calendar field on the wall was flashing its reminder. She stretched her shoulder, testing the limits of the pain. If she slept well, she could do it, perhaps with less energy. There would be questions. She would have to decide on the answers before then, would this time do Shawn the courtesy of telling him what her answers would be.

And soon it would be nothing more than ephemera floating in webspace, evoked from time to time like a fading ghost, through some odd search connection that summoned up a stale blog entry. The world was full of ghosts.

Instead of going to her bed, she slipped outside and found her skimmer parked in its usual place. Someone had cleaned the blood from it. She found her spare glasses in the tool compartment, slipped them on and lifted into the darkness. The lions would be hunting and she might catch the pride on their way down to the river. The pain in her shoulder faded as she toed the skimmer up to speed and slid through the bright bubble of a yesterday that had never really happened. ○

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Orb Books recently reprinted Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's classic novel, *Inferno*, and Tor Books will bring out the long-awaited sequel, *Escape from Hell*, in February. In addition to SF conventions, role-playing games, yoga, hiking, and racquetball, Larry Niven's hobbies include saving civilization and making a little money. To that end, he'd like to help move humanity into space by any means, but particularly by making space endeavors attractive to commercial interests. If he's successful, perhaps one day, aliens really will encounter a mystery while . . .

PASSING PERRY CRATER BASE, TIME UNCERTAIN

Larry Niven

Astrogator shied from the blue and white world. It was too big, its atmosphere too thick, cloudscapes blazing white, seas covering most of its crust. The ship veered away.

"And that's where all the resources are," Geologist said.

"Life," said the Priest. "Oxygen atmosphere means life. To land would threaten an established ecology."

"We must have water," Life Support said. "Four megatons of water before we can go on."

The Captain said, "We'd lose all our passengers. Gravity would kill them. I'm not sure we even have the thrust to try it."

They were talking very rapidly, these computer programs. They were all running on the same hardware, so each knew everything the others did. Only attitude differed.

"Try the satellite," the Captain said. Astrogator obliged.

The moon expanded, then raced below them, crusted with craters. It loomed like a small planet, the horizon a bit close. "Airless," Life Support said. "No water vapor."

"Incoming data," the Xenologist said. "Look."

In close orbit around the big moon, the ship had nearly reached the north pole. Above the rim of a small crater, a long curved rectangle showed in dull silver. "Solar collectors. We've found tool users," said the Xenologist. "Do we not have knowledge to trade for water?"

The ship was high enough to look down into the crater. The Xenologist said, "Domes. Housing for something that needs pressure, and look how they're placed. Ingenious. They'll have continuous sunlight for the collectors. The base is in shad-

ow, but they can heat it. The pole has been in continuous shadow for these billions of years. They'll have water ice to dig up. Helium-three for fusion."

"Look again," the Captain said.

The solar collector was tattered, sprayed with meteor holes.

A score of domes and cylinders were at ambient temperature, well below the freezing point of water. Nothing at all was radiating in the electromagnetic spectrum.

"Abandoned," said the Captain. "Xenologist?"

"Agreed, they are abandoned. That spacecraft wasn't designed to launch lying on its side. We'll have a chance to look them over when we go down for water."

"No," said the Captain. "We'll continue on to the south pole. Maybe we'll find water there."

Astrogator simply obeyed, but Geologist, Priest, and Xenologist set up a clamor. "The passengers will raise hell if we don't show them this!"

The Captain said, "Think it through. That's a good-sized village down there. They were here. They've left. Isn't it clear that they must have mined all the water ice to keep their base going? And then they ran out. No water to support life, no oxygen to breathe, no hydrogen for rocket fuel. We won't find anything. Better try the other pole. It's shaded, like this one."

The little crater and its pocked domes and solar sheet fell behind them. Plaintive Xenologist asked, "Couldn't they have just died in place? What about plague? Or explosive decompression?"

"Of course they might have died," the Captain said. "But what of it? A few deaths won't stop a species that could reach this far. Others of their kind would have returned. There must have been nothing left for them, no way to survive. Why else would intelligent tool users abandon their Moon?"

None of the gathered minds could think of an answer. ○

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BRIDESICLE

Will McIntosh

Will McIntosh's bittersweet story about the possible fate in store for the cryonically frozen, marks his third appearance in *Asimov's*. The author has also published stories in *Science Fiction: Best of the Year 2008*, *Interzone*, *Strange Horizons*, and other venues. He is currently working on two novels, one a baseball fantasy, the other based on his science fiction short story "Soft Apocalypse."

The words were gentle strokes, drawing her awake.
"Hello. Hello there."

She felt the light on her eyelids, and knew that if she opened her eyes they would sting, and she would have to shade them with her palm and let the light bleed through a crack.

"Feel like talking?" A man's soft voice.

And then her mind cleared enough to wonder: where was her mom? She called into the corners of her mind, but there was no answer, and that could not be. Once she'd let Mom in, there was no tossing her out. It was not like letting Mom move into her apartment; there was no going back once Mom was in her mind, because there was no body for Mom to return to.

So where was she?

"Aw, I know you're awake by *now*. Come on, sleeping beauty. Talk to me." The last was a whisper, a lover's words, and Mira felt that she had to come awake and open her eyes. She tried to sigh, but no breath came. Her eyes flew open in alarm.

An old man was leaning over her, smiling, but Mira barely saw him, because when she opened her mouth to inhale, her jaw squealed like a sea bird's cry, and no breath came, and she wanted to press her hands to the sides of her face, but her hands wouldn't come either. Nothing would move except her face.

"Hello, hello. And how are you?" The old man was smiling gently, as if Mira might break if he set his whole smile loose. He was not that old, she saw now. Maybe sixty. The furrows in his forehead and the ones framing his nose only seemed deep because his face was so close to hers, almost close enough for a kiss. "Are you having trouble?" He reached out and stroked her hair. "You have to press down with your back teeth to control the air flow. Didn't they show you?"

There *was* an air flow—a gentle breeze, whooshing up her throat and out her mouth and nose. It tickled the tiny hairs in her nostrils. She bit down, and the breeze became a hiss—an exhale strong enough that her chest should drop, but it didn't, or maybe it did and she just couldn't tell, because she couldn't lift her head to look.

"Where—" Mira said, and then she howled in terror, because her voice sounded horrible—deep and hoarse and hollow, the voice of something that had pulled itself from a swamp.

"It takes some getting used to. Am I your first? No one has revived you before? Not even for an orientation?" The notion seemed to please him, that he was her first, whatever that meant. Mira studied him, wondering if she should recognize him. He preened at her attention, as if expecting Mira to be glad to see him. He was not an attractive man—his nose was thick and bumpy, and not in an aristocratic way. His nostrils were like a bull's; his brow Neanderthal, but his mouth dainty. She didn't recognize him.

"I can't move. Why can't I move?" Mira finally managed. She looked around as best she could.

"It's okay. Try to relax. Only your face is working."

"What happened?" Mira finally managed.

"You were in a car accident," he said, his brow now flexed with concern. He consulted a readout on his palm. "Fairly major damage. Ruptured aorta. Right leg gone."

Right leg gone? Her right leg? She couldn't see anything except the man hanging over her and a gold-colored ceiling, high, high above. "This is a hospital?" she asked.

"No, no. A dating center."

"What?" For the first time she noticed that there were other voices in the room, speaking in low, earnest, confidential tones. She caught snippets close by:

"... neutral colors. How could anyone choose violet?"

"... last time I was at a Day-Glows concert I was seventeen..."

"I shouldn't be the one doing this." The man turned, looked over his shoulder. "There's usually an orientation." He raised his voice. "Hello?" He turned back around to face her, shrugged, looking bemused. "I guess we're on our own." He clasped his hands, leaned in toward Mira. "The truth is, you see, you died in the accident..."

Mira didn't hear the next few things he said. She felt as if she were floating. It was an absurd idea, that she might be dead yet hear someone tell her she was dead. But somehow it rang true. She didn't remember dying, but she sensed some hard, fast line—some demarcation between now and before. The idea made her want to flee, escape her body, which was a dead body. Her teeth were corpse's teeth.

"... your insurance covered the deep-freeze preservation, but full revival, especially when it involves extensive injury, is terribly costly. That's where the dating service comes in—"

"Where is my mother?" Mira interrupted.

The man consulted his palm again. He nodded. "You had a hitcher. Your mother." He glanced around again, raised his hand as if to wave at someone, then dropped it.

A hitcher. What an apropos term. "Is she gone?" Mira wanted to say "Is she dead?" but that had become an ambiguous concept.

"Yes. You need consistent brain activity to maintain a hitcher. Once you die, the hitcher is gone."

Like a phone number you're trying to remember, Mira thought. You have to hold it with thought, and if you lose it, you never get it back. Mira felt hugely relieved. From the moment she awakened, she kept expecting to hear her mother's voice. Now she knew it wouldn't come, and she could relax. She felt guilty for feeling relieved that her mother was dead, but who would blame her? Certainly not anyone who'd known her mother. Certainly not Lynn.

"I have a sister," she said. "Lynn." Her jaw moved so stiffly.

"Yes, a twin sister. Now that would be interesting." The man grinned, his eyebrows raised.

"Is she still alive?"

"No," he said in a tone that suggested she was a silly girl. "You've been gone for over eighty years, sleeping beauty." He made a sweeping gesture, as if all of that was

trivial. "But let's focus on the present. The way this works is, we get acquainted. We have dates. If we find we're compatible," he raised his shoulders toward his ears, smiled his dainty smile, "then I might be enticed to pay for you to be revived, so that we can be together."

Dates.

"So. My name is Red, and I know from your readout that your name is Mira. Nice to meet you, Mira."

"Nice to meet you," Mira murmured. He'd said she died in a car accident. She tried to remember; but nothing came. Nothing about the accident, anyway. The memories that raced up at her were arguments—arguments with her mother. An argument at a shopping mall. Mom hating everything Mira liked, trying to get Mira to go to the Seniors section and buy cheap, drab housedresses. Mom had had no control of Mira's body (she was only a hitcher, after all), but there are lots of ways to control.

"So. Mira." Red clapped his hands together. "Do you want to bullshit, or do you want to get intimate?"

The raised eyebrows again, the same as when he made the twins comment. "I don't understand," Mira said.

"Weeeell. For example, here's a question." He leaned in close, his breath puffing in her ear. "If I revived you, what sorts of things would you do to me?"

Mira was sure that this man's name was not Red, and she doubted he was here to revive anyone. "I don't know. That's an awfully intimate question. Why don't we get to know each other first?" She needed time to think. Even just a few minutes of quiet, to make sense of this.

Red frowned theatrically. "Come on. Tease me a little."

Should she tell Red she was gay? Surely not. He would lose interest, and maybe report it to whoever owned the facility. But why hadn't whoever owned the facility known she was gay? Maybe that was to be part of the orientation she'd missed. Whatever the reason, did she want to risk being taken out of circulation, or unplugged and buried?

Would that be the worst thing?

The thought jangled something long forgotten. Or more like deeply forgotten; everything in her life was long forgotten. She'd thought something along those lines once, and there had been *so much* pain that the pain still echoed, even without the memory. She reached for the memory, but it was sunk deep in a turgid goo that she encountered whenever she tried to remember something. Had she really been able to effortlessly pull up memories when she was alive, or was that just how she remembered it?

"I'm just—" she wanted to say "not in the mood," but that was not only a cliché, but a vast understatement. She was dead. She couldn't move anything but her face, and that made her feel untethered, as if she were floating, drifting. Hands and feet grounded you. Mira had never realized. "I'm just not very good at this sort of thing."

"Well." Red put his hands on his thighs, made a production of standing. "This costs quite a bit, and they charge by the minute. So I'll say goodbye now, and you can go back to being dead."

Go back? "Wait!" Mira said. They could bring her back, and then let her die again? She imagined her body, sealed up somewhere, maybe for years, maybe forever. The idea terrified her. Red paused, waiting. "Okay. I would . . ." She tried to think of something, but there were so many things running through her mind, so many trains of thought she wanted to follow, none of them involving the pervert leaning over her.

Were there other ways to get permanently "revived"? Did she have any living rela-

tives she might contact, or maybe a savings account that had been accruing interest for the past eighty years? Had she had any savings when she died? She'd had a house—she remembered that. Lynn would have inherited it.

"Fine, if you're not going to talk, I'll just say goodbye," Red snapped. "But don't think anyone else is coming. Your injuries would make you a costly revival, and there are tens of thousands of women here. Plus men don't want the women who'd been frozen sixty years before the facility opened, because they have nothing in common with those women."

"Please," Mira said.

He reached for something over her head, out of sight.

Mira dreamed that she was running on a trail in the woods. The trail sloped upward, growing steeper and steeper until she was running up big steps. Then the steps entered a flimsy plywood tower and wound up, up. It was dark, and she could barely see, but it felt so good to run; it had been such a long time that she didn't care how steep it was. She climbed higher, considered turning back, but she wanted to make it to the top after having gone so far. Finally she reached the top, and there was a window where she could see a vast river, and a lovely college campus set along it. She hurried over to the window for a better view, and as she did, the tower leaned under her shifting weight, and began to fall forward. The tower built speed, hurtled toward the buildings. *This is it*, she thought, her stomach flip-flopping. *This is the moment of my death.*

Mira jolted awake before she hit the ground.

An old man—likely in his seventies—squinted down at her. "You're not my type," he grumbled, reaching over her head.

"Hi." It came out phlegmy; the man cleared his throat. "I've never done this before." He was a fat man, maybe forty.

"What's the date?" Mira asked, still groggy.

"January third, twenty-three fifty-two," the man said. Nearly thirty years had passed. The man wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist. "I feel a little sick for being here, like I'm a child molester or something." He frowned. "But there are so many stories out there of people finding true love in the drawers. My cousin Ansel met his second wife Floren at a revival center. Lovely woman."

The man gave her a big, sloppy smile. "I'm Lycan, by the way."

"I'm Mira. Nice to meet you."

"Your smile is a little wavery, in a cute way. I can tell you're honest. You wouldn't use me to get revived and then divorce me. You have to watch out for that." Lycan sat at an angle, perhaps trying to appear thinner.

"I can see how that would be a concern," Mira said.

Lycan heaved a big sigh. "Maybe meeting women at a bridesicle place is pathetic, but it's not as pathetic as showing up at every company party alone, with your hands in your pockets instead of holding someone else's, or else coming with a woman who not only has a loud laugh and a lousy sense of humor, but is ten years older than you and not very attractive. *That's* pathetic. Let people suspect my beautiful young wife was revived. They'll still be jealous, and I'll still be walking tall, holding her hand as everybody checks her out."

Lycan fell silent for a moment. "My grandmother says I'm talking too much. Sorry."

So Lycan had a hitcher. At least one. It was so difficult to tell—you got so good at carrying on two conversations at once when you had a hitcher.

"No, I like it," Mira said. It allowed her precious time to think. When she was alive, there had been times in Mira's life when she had little free time, but she had always

had time to think. She could think while commuting to work, while standing in lines, and during all of the other in-between times. Suddenly it was the most precious thing.

Lycan wiped his palms. "First dates are not my best moments."

"You're doing great." Mira smiled as best she could, although she knew the smile did not reach her eyes. She had to get out of here, had to convince one of these guys to revive her. One of these guys? This was only the third person to revive her in the fifty years that the place had been open, and if the first guy, the pervert, was to be believed, she'd become less desirable the longer she was here.

Mira wished she could see where she was. Was she in a coffin? On a bed? She wished she could move her neck. "What's it like in here?" she asked. "Are we in a room?"

"You want to see? Here." Lycan held his palm a foot or so over her face; a screen embedded there flashing words and images in three dimensions transformed into a mirror.

Mira recoiled. Her own dead face looked down at her, her skin grey, her lips bordering on blue. Her face was flaccid—she looked slightly unbalanced, or mentally retarded, rather than peaceful. A glittering silver mesh concealed her to the neck.

Lycan angled the mirror, giving her a view of the room. It was a vast, open space, like the atrium of an enormous hotel. A lift was descending through the center of the atrium. People hurried across beautifully designed bridges as crystal blue water traced twisting paths through huge transparent tubes suspended in the open space, giving the impression of flying streams. Nearby, Mira saw a man sitting beside an open drawer, his mouth moving, head nodding, hands set a little self-consciously in his lap.

Lycan took the mirror away. His eyes had grown big and round.

"What is it?" Mira asked.

He opened his mouth to speak, then changed his mind, shook his head. "Nothing."

"Please, tell me."

There was a long pause. Mira guessed it was an internal dispute. Finally, Lycan answered. "It's just that it's finally hitting me at a gut level: I'm talking to a dead person. If I could hold your hand, your fingers would be cold and stiff."

Mira looked away, toward the ceiling. She felt ashamed. Ashamed of the dead body that housed her.

"What's it like?" he whispered, as if he were asking something obscene.

Mira didn't want to answer, but she also didn't want to go back to being dead. "It's hard. It's hard to have no control over anything, not when I can be awake, or who I talk to. And to be honest, it's scary. When you end this date I'm going to be gone—no thoughts, no dreaming, just nothingness. It terrifies me. I dread those few minutes before the date ends."

Lycan looked sorry he'd asked, so Mira changed the subject, asking about Lycan's hitchers. He had two: his father and his grandmother.

"I don't get it," Mira said. "Why are there still hitchers if they've figured out how to revive people?" In her day, medical science had progressed enough that there was hope of a breakthrough, and preservation was common, but the dead stayed dead.

"Bodies wear out," Lycan said, matter of factly. "If you revive a lady who's ninety-nine, she'll just keep dying. So, tell me about yourself. I see you had a hitcher?"

Mira told Lycan about her mother, and Lycan uttered the requisite condolences, and she pretended they were appropriate. She held no illusions about why she had agreed to host her mother. It was, in a sense, a purely selfish motive: she knew she couldn't live with the guilt if she said no. It was emotional blackmail, what her mother did, but it was flawlessly executed.

But I'm dying. Mira, I'm scared. Please. Even across eighty years and death, Mira could still hear her mother's voice, its perpetually aggrieved tone.

An awful darkness filled her when she thought of her mother. She felt guilty and ashamed. But what did she have to feel ashamed of? What do you owe your mother if the only kindness she had ever offered was giving birth to you? Do you owe her a room in your mind? What if you loved a woman instead of a "nice man," and your mother barely spoke to you? How about if your soulmate died, painfully, and your mother's attempt to console you was to say "Maybe next time you should try a man." As if Jeanette's death justified her mother's disapproval.

"What if I actually find someone here, and she agrees to marry me in exchange for being revived?" Lycan was saying. "Would people sense she was too good-looking to be with me, and guess that I'd met her at a bridesicle place? We'd have to come up with a convincing story about how and where we met—something that doesn't sound made up."

"Bridesicle?"

Lycan shrugged. "That's what some people call this sort of place."

Then even if someone revived her, she would be a pariah. People would want nothing to do with her. Her mother's voice rang in her mind, almost harmonizing the line.

I want nothing to do with you. You and your girlfriend.

"I'm afraid it's time for me to say goodbye. I should circulate. But maybe we can talk again?" Lycan said.

She didn't want to die again, didn't want to be thrown into that abyss. She had so much to think about, to remember. "I'd like that," was all she said, resisting the urge to scream, to beg this man not to kill her. If Mira did that, he'd never come back. As he reached over to turn her off, Mira used her last few seconds to try to reach for the memory of her accident. It sat like a splinter under her skin.

Lycan came back. He told her it had been a week since his first visit. Mira had no sense of how much time had passed, the way you do when you've been asleep. A week felt the same as thirty years.

"I've talked to eleven women, and none of them were half as interesting as you. Es-

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pecially the women who died recently. Modern women can be so shallow, so unwilling to seek a common ground. I don't want a relationship that's a struggle—I want to care about my wife's needs, to be able to say, 'no, honey, let's go see the movie you want to see,' and count on her saying, 'no, that's okay, I know how much you want to see that other one.' And sometimes we would see her movie, and sometimes mine."

"I know just what you mean," Mira said, in what she hoped was an intimate tone. As intimate as her graveyard voice could manage.

"That's why I came to the bottom floor, to the women who died one hundred, 125 years ago. I thought, why not a woman from a more innocent time? She would probably be more appreciative. The woman at the orientation told me that choosing a bridesicle instead of a live woman was a generous thing to do—you were giving a life to someone who'd been cheated out of hers. I don't kid myself, though—I'm not doing this out of some nobility, but it's nice to think I'm doing something good for someone, and the girls at the bottom need it more than the girls at the top. You've been in line longer."

Mira had been in line a long time. It didn't seem that way, though. It had only been, what, about an hour of life since she died? It was difficult to gauge, because she didn't remember dying. Mira tried to think back. Had her car accident been in the city, or on a highway? Had she been at fault? Nothing came, except memories of what must have been the weeks leading up to it, of her mother driving her crazy.

Once she took in her mother, she could never love again. How could she make love to someone with her mother watching? Even a man would have been out of the question, although a man was out of the question in any case.

"It's awkward, though," Lycan was saying. "There aren't any nice ways to tell someone that you aren't interested. I'm not in practice rejecting women. I'm much more familiar with the other end of the equation. If you weren't in that drawer, you probably wouldn't give me a second glance."

Mira could see that he was fishing, that he wanted her to tell him he was wrong, that she would give him a second glance. It was difficult—it wasn't in her nature to pretend that she felt something she didn't. But she didn't have the luxury of honoring her nature.

"Of course I would. You're a wonderful man, and good-looking."

Lycan beamed. What is it about us, Mira wondered, that we will believe any lie, no matter how outrageous, if it's flattering?

"Some people just spark something in you, make you breathe fast, you know?" Lycan said. "Others don't. It's hard to say why, but in those first seconds of seeing someone," he snapped his fingers, "you can always tell." He held her gaze for a moment, something that was clearly uncomfortable for him, then looked at his lap, blushing.

"I know what you mean," Mira said. She tried to smile warmly, knowingly. It made her feel like shit.

There was a constant murmur of background chatter this time.

... through life and revival, to have and to hold ...

"What is that I'm hearing? Is that a marriage ceremony?" Mira asked.

Lycan glanced over his shoulder, nodded. "They happen all the time here. It's kind of risky to revive someone otherwise."

"Of course," Mira said. She'd been here for decades, yet she knew nothing about this place.

"There's something I have to tell you," Lycan said. It was their sixth or seventh date. Mira had grown fond of Lycan, which was a good thing, because the only thing

she ever saw was Lycan's doughy jowls, the little bump of chin poking out of them. He was her life, such as it was.

"What is it?" Mira asked.

He looked off into the room, sighed heavily. "I've never enjoyed a woman's company as much as yours. I have to be honest with you, but I'm afraid if I am I'll lose you."

Mira tried to imagine what this man could possibly say that would lead her to choose being dead over his company. "I'm sure that won't happen, whatever it is. You can trust me."

Lycan put his hand over his eyes. His chest hitched. Mira made gentle shushing sounds, the sort of sounds her mother had never made, not even when Jeanette died.

"It's okay," she cooed. "Whatever it is, it's okay."

Lycan finally looked at her, his eyes red. "I really like you, Mira. I think I even love you. But I'm not a rich man. I can't afford to revive you, and I never will. Not even if I sold everything I owned."

She hadn't even realized how much hope she was harboring until it was dashed. "Well, that's not your fault, I guess." She tried to sound chipper, though inside she felt black despair.

Lycan nodded. "I'm sorry I lied to you."

Mira didn't have to ask why he came here pretending to be looking for a wife if he couldn't afford to revive anyone. The women here must all be kind to him, must hang on his every word in the hope that he'd choose them and free them from their long sleep. Where else would a man like Lycan get that sort of attention?

"Can you forgive me?" Lycan asked, looking like a scolded bulldog. "Can I still visit you?"

"Of course. I'd miss you terribly if you didn't." The truth was, if Lycan didn't visit Mira would be incapable of missing anyone. No one else was visiting, or likely to stumble upon her among the army of bridesicles lined shoulder-to-shoulder in boxes in this endless mausoleum.

That was the end of it. Lycan changed the subject, struck up a conversation about his collection of vintage gaming code, and Mira listened, and made "mm-hm" sounds in the pauses, and thought her private thoughts.

She found herself thinking about her mom more than Jeanette. Perhaps it was because she'd already learned to accept that Jeanette was gone, and Mom's death was still fresh, despite being not nearly as heartbreaking. After Jeanette died, Mira had worked over her death until there were no new thoughts she could possibly think. And then she had finally been able to let Jeanette rest . . .

She had the most astonishing thought. She couldn't believe it hadn't occurred to her until now. Jeanette had worked for Capital Lifekey, just like Mira. Preservation had been part of Jeanette's benefits package, just like Mira.

"Lycan, would you do something for me?" It felt as if an eternity rode on the question she was about to ask.

"Sure. Anything."

"Would you run a search on a friend of mine who died?"

"What's her name?"

"Jeanette Zierk. Born twenty-two twenty-four."

Mira was not as anxious as she thought she should be as Lycan checked, probably because her heart could not race, and her palms could not sweat. It was surprising how much emotion was housed in the body instead of the mind.

Lycan checked. "Yes. She's here."

"She's *here*? In this place?"

"Yes." He consulted the readout, pulling his palm close to his nose, then he pointed across the massive atrium, lower down than they were. "Over there. I don't know

why you're surprised, if she was stored she'd be here—it's a felony to renege on a storage contract."

Mira wished she could lift her head and look where he was pointing. She had spent the last few years of her life accepting that Jeanette was really gone, and would never come back. "Can you wake her, and give her a message from me? Please?"

Lycan was rendered momentarily speechless.

"Please?" Mira said. "It would mean so much to me."

"Okay. I guess. Sure. Hold on." Lycan stood tenuously, looked confused for a moment and then headed off.

He returned a moment later. "What message should I give her?"

Mira wanted to ask Lycan to tell Jeanette she loved her, but that might be a bad idea. "Just tell her I'm here. Thank you so much."

Maybe it was someone else, or Mira's imagination, but she felt sure she heard a distant caw of surprise. Jeanette, reacting to the news.

Soon Lycan's smiling face poked into view above her. "She was very excited by the news. I mean, out of her head excited. I thought she'd leap out of her crèche and hug me."

"What did she say?" Mira tried to sound calm. Jeanette was here. Suddenly, everything had changed. Mira had a reason to live. She had to figure out how to get out there.

"She said to tell you she loved you."

Mira sobbed. He had really talked to Jeanette. What a strange and wonderful and utterly incomprehensible thing.

"She also said she hoped you didn't suffer much in the accident."

"It wasn't an accident," Mira said.

It just came out. She said it without having thought it first, which was a strange experience, as if someone had taken control of her dead mouth and formed the words, rode them out of her on the hiss of air coursing through her throat.

There was a long, awkward silence.

"What do you mean?" Lycan said, frowning.

Mira remembered now. Not the moment itself, but planning it, intending it. She had put on her best tan suit. Mother kept asking what the occasion was. She wanted to know why Mira was making such a fuss when they were only going to Pan Pietro for dinner. She said that Mira wasn't as beautiful as she thought she was and should get off her high horse. Mira had barely heard her. For once, she had not been bothered by her mother's words.

"I mean it wasn't an accident," she repeated. "You were honest with me, I want to be honest with you." She did not want to be honest with him, actually, but it had come out, and now that it was out she didn't have the strength to draw it back in.

"Oh. Well, thank you." Lycan scratched his scalp with one finger, pondering. Mira wasn't sure if he got what she was saying. After all their conversation, she still had little sense of whether Lycan was intelligent or not. "You know, if I figure out a way to revive you, you could come with me to my company's annual picnic. Last year I announced to my whole table that I was going to win the door prize, and then I did!"

Lycan went on about his company picnic while Mira thought about Jeanette, who had just told Mira she loved her, even though they were both dead.

Far too soon, Lycan said goodbye. He told Mira he would see her on Tuesday, and killed her.

The man hovering over her was wearing a suit and tie, only the suit was sleeveless and the tie rounded, and the man's skin was bright orange.

"What year is it, please?" Mira said.

"Twenty-four seventy-seven," he said, not unkindly.

Mira couldn't remember the date Lycan had last come. Twenty-four? It had been twenty-three something, hadn't it? It was a hundred years later. Lycan had never come back. He was gone—dead, or hitching with some relative.

The orange man's name was Neas. Mira didn't think it would be polite to ask why he was orange, so instead she asked what he did for a living. He was an attorney. It suggested to Mira that the world had not changed all that much since she'd been alive, that there were still attorneys, even if they had orange skin.

"My grandfather Lycan says to tell you hello," Neas said.

Mira grinned. It was hard to hold the grin with her stiff lips, but it felt good. Lycan had come back after all. "Tell him he's late, but that's okay."

"He insisted we talk to you."

Neas chatted amiably about Lycan. Lycan had met a woman at a Weight Watchers meeting, and his wife didn't think it was appropriate that he visit Mira any more. They had divorced twenty years later. He died of a heart attack at sixty-six, was revived, then hitched with his son when he reached his nineties. Lycan's son had hitched with Neas a few years ago, taking Lycan with him.

"I'm glad Lycan's all right," Mira said when Neas had finished. "I'd grown very fond of him."

"And he of you." Neas crossed his legs, cleared his throat. "So tell me Mira, did you want to have children when you were alive?" His tone had shifted to that of a supervisor interviewing a potential employee.

The question caught Mira off guard. She'd assumed this was a social call, especially after Neas said that Lycan had insisted they visit her.

"Yes, actually. I had hoped to. Things don't always work out the way you plan." Mira pictured Jeanette, a stone's throw away, dead in a box. Neas' question raised a flicker of hope. "Is this a date, then?" she asked.

"No." He nodded, perhaps to some suggestion from one of his hitchers. "Actually we're looking for someone to bear a child and help raise her. You see, my wife was dying of Dietz Syndrome, which is an unrevivable illness, so she hitched with me. We want to have a child. We need a host, and a caregiver, for the child."

"I see." Mira's head was spinning. Should she blurt out that she'd love the opportunity to raise their child, or would that signal that she was taking the issue too lightly? She settled on a thoughtful expression that hopefully conveyed her understanding of the seriousness of the situation.

"We would marry for legal reasons, of course, but the arrangement would be completely platonic."

"Yes, of course."

Neas sighed, looking suddenly annoyed. "I'm sorry, Mira, my wife says you're not right. Lycan is very upset." He stood, reached over Mira's head. "We've interviewed forty or fifty women, but none are good enough," he added testily.

"No, wait!" Mira said.

Neas paused.

Mira thought fast. What had she done to make the wife suddenly rule her out? The wife must feel terribly threatened at the idea of having a woman in the house, raising her child. Tempting her husband. If Mira could allay the wife's fears . . .

"I'm gay," she said.

Neas looked beyond surprised. Evidently Lycan hadn't realized who Jeanette was, even after carrying the verbal love note. Friends could say they loved each other. Neas said nothing, and Mira knew they were having a pow-wow. She prayed she'd read the situation correctly.

"So, you *couldn't* fall in love with me?" Neas finally asked. It was such a bizarre question. Neas was not only a man, he was an orange man, and not particularly attractive.

"No. I'm in love with a woman named Jeanette. Lycan met her."

There was another long silence.

"There's also this business about your auto accident not being an accident."

Myra had forgotten. How could she so easily forget that she killed herself and her own mother? Maybe because it had been so long ago. Everything from before her death seemed so long ago now. Like another lifetime.

"It was so long ago," Mira murmured. "But yes, it's true."

"You took your mother's life?"

"No, that's not what I intended." It wasn't. Mira hadn't wanted her mother dead, she'd just wanted to escape her. "I fled from her. Just because someone is your mother doesn't mean she can't be impossible to live with."

Neas nodded slowly. "It's difficult for us to imagine that. Hitching has been a very powerful experience for us. Oona and I never dreamed we could be this close, and we're happy to have dad and grandfather and great-grandmother as companions. I know I wouldn't trade it for anything."

"I can see how it could be beautiful," Mira said. "It's like a marriage, I think, but more so. It magnifies the relationship—good ones get closer and deeper; bad ones become intolerable."

Neas's eyes teared up. "Lycan said we can trust you. We need someone we can trust." He kept on nodding for a moment, lost in thought. Then he waved his hand; a long line of written text materialized in the air. "Do you believe in spanking children?" he asked, reading the first line.

"Absolutely not," Mira answered, knowing her very existence depended on her answers.

Mira's heart was racing so fast it felt as if there were wings flapping in her chest. Lucia was sleeping, her soft little head pressed to Mira's racing heart. The lift swept them up; the vast atrium opened below as people on the ground shrank to dots.

She wanted to run, but kept her pace even, her transparent shoes thwacking on the marble floor.

She cried when Jeanette opened her eyes, swept her fingers behind Jeanette's bluish-white ear, lightly brushed her blue lips.

Jeanette sobbed. To her, it would have been only a moment since Lycan had spoken to her.

"You made it," Jeanette croaked in that awful dead voice. She noticed the baby, smiled. "Good for you." So like Jeanette, to ask for nothing, not even life. If Jeanette had come to Mira's crèche alive and whole, the first words out of Mira's stiff mouth would have been "Get me out of here."

Vows from a wedding ceremony drifted from a few levels above, the husband's voice strong and sure, the wife's toneless and froggy.

"I can't afford to revive you, love," Mira said, "but I've saved enough to absorb you. Is that good enough? Will you stay with me, for the rest of our lives?"

You can't cry when you're dead, but Jeanette tried, and only the tears were missing. "Yes," she said. "That's a thousand times better than good enough."

Mira nodded, grinning. "It will take a few days to arrange." She touched Jeanette's cold cheek. "I'll be back in an eyeblink. This is the last time you have to die."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Mira reached up, and Jeanette died, for the last time. ○

Robert R. Chase tells us that he is now the actual (as opposed to "acting") chief counsel at an Army laboratory. He lives with his family and a dog named after Malcolm Reynolds, hero of Joss Whedon's late, lamented *Firefly* series. The author will be entertaining no retirement plans until his youngest graduates from Rensselaer. Robert would like to think that the spirit of Poul Anderson hovers over the story that takes us . . .

FIVE THOUSAND LIGHT YEARS FROM BIRDLAND

Robert R. Chase

The Star Spear

There was no sense of the stars rushing past us, or of being crushed into a singularity or being turned inside out in eleven dimensions. Instead, there was a momentary inattention, the sort of lapse that might occur driving late at night in the desert when the blink of your eyes extends a second too long and you snap your head back from the steering wheel. One instant, I was gazing through the nose of Screet's starship, courtesy of the viewing visor connected to its sensing system, at the constellation of Sagittarius. The next, I blinked (or turned aside, or daydreamed for a moment) and when I refocused, the stars had shifted color and position.

"That was it?" I asked. My voice shook just the least bit. "That was our fifty light-year jump?"

Screet regarded me closely. Gold-flecked eyes with 20:5 vision flanked a cruel beak. Blood-red feathers made a bull's-eye around both eyes before shading into the cobalt blue of the rest of the body.

"Affirmative probability," said the translation device hooked into my ear. "Relocation has been effected. Precision of move at 70 percent and increasing. Further sightings being taken." That was mostly comprehensible. With luck, it was also what

Screet meant to convey. Translation had been a problem ever since Screet's resuscitation. Most of the E-Team fretted over terms that seemed impossible to translate. I was more worried about translations that we thought were right but weren't quite.

Screet was not his—its—his name. His actual name was Scree'ata'ata'ert'eu'ert (those last three sounded while inhaling) woo'eta-tatatik'ka'et and so on for half a typed page. About a third of it was pitched above the range of human hearing. Informed speculation was that, in addition to what we would call a name, this included social descriptors and an extended genealogy, but no one knew for sure. I called him Screet and let the translator pronounce the complete name in all its glory. Screet, of course, could sneeze it out in less than two seconds.

"Relocation" was even less understood. It was, however, the way in which Screet's people could travel between the stars without being constrained by the speed of light, and thus the focus of much anxious investigation. The version given to me went something like this. In quantum mechanics, not only light but everything else has an associated waveform. Generally, the envelope of the waveform closely corresponds to the shape of the item. However, the tails of the waveforms extend to infinity. Screet's race had learned how to relax the waveform of a starship and everyone inside to an arbitrary degree, moving the envelope to any point along the tails and then allowing it to collapse to its new state.

"You are disturbed," Screet said. "Think visors arbitrary? Perhaps outside view believed more convincing."

It took me a moment to understand the offer. "I trust the visors." Mainly because Screet had no reason to lie to me about this. Either we got back to his home system or we didn't. And since we did not pack a pressure suit for me, an outside view was not indicated.

"Trust is good. Knowledge/certainty—" The translator indecisively provided both words. "—is better."

Earth

It was first identified as a previously uncharted asteroid and given a one in three thousand chance of hitting the Earth. Then radio telescopes picked up signals that repeated themselves every eighty-five seconds. Its path would take it inside the orbit of Mercury. On its way out to interstellar space, it would cross Earth's orbit at a distance only three times greater than the distance to the Moon.

We had fifteen months. The *Ares Reach* had been built by the CIJUS (China, India, Japan, United States) nations for a Mars mission. Its crew was cut from twenty to three, its fusion engines rebuilt to provide bursts of 1.5 gee acceleration.

The newly-christened *Stellar Bounty* launched on the last possible day to make a rendezvous. It drew even with the artifact as it raced back from the Sun. The crew attached rockets to its blackened hull and nudged the starship into high Earth orbit. When they entered the airlock, they were astonished to find the electrical system still operational. But that was nothing compared to their reaction when they discovered Screet in his hibernation chamber and realized that resuscitation procedures had begun.

The Star Spear

The settings for the living areas were adjusted for equitable sharing of discomfort. At sixty degrees Fahrenheit, it was ten degrees cooler than I liked it and ten degrees

warmer than optimal for Sreet. Atmospheric pressure was 1.1 times Earth sea level average, not a big deal, but the oxygen level was 35 percent rather than the 21 percent I was used to. Hundred percent oxygen at standard pressure causes pulmonary edema, chest pains, collapsed lung alveoli, blindness and, oh yes, eventually death. No one really knew what the long term effect would be on me. The only advice I had been given by the Army doctors was not to breathe too deeply.

The ship could recycle its water supply. I had been stocked with a three year supply of vitamin and mineral supplements. Our biochemistry was considered similar enough that I could survive on Sreet's supplies for protein and roughage. I had also been provided with a rack of spices, since cooking seems to be a uniquely human art.

During the first week, I found shipboard life thrilling, uncomfortable, and boring in equal parts. Being humanity's ambassador to the stars (as one news organization put it) was both exciting and even daunting. Being confined within the starship, with only the occasional change in star patterns to suggest that we were progressing toward Sreet's home world, quickly lessened the thrill and replaced it with something like claustrophobia. This despite the fact that the starship was, compared to human spaceships, incredibly spacious. The livable area consisted of six oval rooms, called nodules by our tech staff, connected by tubular corridors. The corridors formed two circles intersecting at right angles. Each nodule was ninety degrees away from all the others. Why this should be, aside from a vaguely pleasing symmetry, was something our scientists had never figured out and Sreet had never been asked to explain. The control room was the one furthest forward. The nodule on the starboard side had been set aside for me, though like all the others it lacked doors. Privacy might be an alien concept to Sreet's people. On the other hand, the craft had apparently been designed for a single occupant, so perhaps privacy was never an issue.

I spent most of the time in my quarters trying to make sense of Sreet and his civilization. It took considerable mental discipline to keep reminding myself that most obvious analogies were probably deceptive. Start with the physical ones. The news organizations referred to Sreet as a birdman, committing two errors with one word. The resemblance to birds was only a surface similarity. Sreet had six limbs. Underneath the gorgeous and fully functional wings were two arms, not as strong as human arms but evidently strong enough to forge a technologically advanced civilization. The "feathers," although light and warm and aerodynamically tapered, were considered by our zoologists to be only feather analogs. Part of the difference was that they linked together to form a lightweight but surprisingly tough mesh. On the biochemical level, Sreet seemed to require three nonstandard amino acids in his food, which was one of the main reasons he had said he needed to return to his home as soon as his ship was repaired.

In the course of his three months on Earth, Sreet put as much effort into trying to understand human culture as we had in trying to understand his. Even now, he would quiz me whenever seemingly random questions popped into his brain. When the questions concerned history or science, I could supplement my own opinions with information from the data disks that had been packed for me. I could not understand why some subjects interested him, much less the connections he made between them. For example, he was intrigued by descriptions of both jazz and improv comedy, where I could discern at least the ghost of a relationship. On the other hand, I had no idea why he characterized poker as "anti-jazz." He wanted to know what I thought about cost-benefit analysis, and did Eisenhower use it while planning the Normandy invasion?

I wanted to know if my role was that of ambassador, or of an American Indian brought to the court of the Sun King as an exotic amusement. And either way, why had I been chosen to fill the role? It was a question Sreet steadfastly refused to answer.

Rudimentary understandings were achieved even before the astronauts returned to Earth. Numbers: Sreet's people used base six. Terms for affirmation or negation. Personal names. Terms for shipboard items like airlock and pressure suit. Captain Anderson radioed home that communication was being established with "miraculous ease."

In retrospect it was clear that, whatever the humans thought, it was Sreet who was controlling the translation sessions. It was also obvious why. We might have time for leisurely study. He had to repair his craft and get home before he ran out of food, since it was possible (and turned out to be the case) that the terrestrial ecology would provide insufficient nourishment.

Naturally, most of the language sessions, whether with the astronauts or on Earth, concentrated on technical matters. Sreet needed certain components of his drive engines replaced. The CIJUS nations and their allies wanted to do everything possible to help, and not from purely altruistic motives. Sreet's ship had two different drive systems: a reactionless drive for sublight speeds and a quantum drive for jumping between stars. Both utilized zero point energy. The technology was beyond price.

But there were other things we wanted to know. Things like the sort of society that had produced Sreet: what were its mores, its values? What did it think about technologically inferior races? According to Sreet, he had been exploring an area near the Trifid Nebula in the Sagittarius arm of the Milky Way. Coming out of jump, his ship had found itself in the outer edges of a supernova explosion. Safety systems cut in automatically, throwing Sreet into protective cold sleep and initiating a random jump of the *Star Spear*. Sreet said that his people had never explored this part of the galaxy and had no idea of humanity's existence. Some members of the evaluation committee were beginning to whisper that it would be well for things to stay that way. "Mere contact with a superior civilization did in the Tahitians. There is only one way to make certain it doesn't happen to us."

Sreet appeared to have nothing to hide. He allowed us complete access to everything in his ship's databanks. This contained a library's worth of histories and fictions, surely enough to give us an idea of how the People of the Air (the name for Sreet's race as a whole) viewed themselves. The problem was that a month after Sreet landed on Earth, we had a vocabulary of about five percent of Sreet's language. We had only just realized that about 40 percent of what he said was too high for human hearing. We were also coming to suspect that we only partially understood the concepts and contexts of the 5 percent we did have.

My job was to try to reduce our ocean of ignorance. Sreet seemed intrigued by my history: growing up tough in the *barrios*, being given by a judge the choice between jail and the Army, landing in language school, becoming an interrogator and eventually a professor of linguistics.

"Your peoples churn," Sreet said. "That is good."

"We do and it is," I agreed. If that were not the case, I would still be stuck in a slum, if not dead. "I see from your histories that the fortunes of People of the Air churn as well. I was hoping you could clarify some terms for me. I keep coming across the phrase *eutik si euban*. It seems to be very important. The context implies that is a pairing of opposites. In my language, we talk of war or peace, good or evil, hot or cold, and so forth. The 'eu' prefix, however, seems to imply that both of these are good in some way. Can you clarify the meaning of the term?"

"This is . . . difficult," Sreet said. My notebook screen informed me that the word for difficult had two meanings. The first meant requiring extra effort. The second, tentative, meaning suggested embarrassment, loss of status.

"Let it go," Knox commanded in my earphone. He monitored all the interview sessions for compliance with CIJUS guidelines. Meeting him, you might think him an idiot until he opened his mouth. Then you knew for sure. "The phrase you are asking about has been identified as a hot button one. Since he's clearly reluctant, go on to the next topic."

Bullshit! I thought. *That's why it takes us forever to learn anything.* "Only the difficult is worth doing," I said, quoting a line from a People of the Air proverb. "And only the exalted," a word which seemed to mean in equal parts hero, noble, and saint, can achieve it. This is a matter worth exploration."

"His pulse rate and respiration just shot up," Knox said. "You are upsetting him. If he shuts up, CIJUS will have my ass. This is too important to risk offending him. Back off."

Screet was completely motionless, fixing me with the sort of intense stare I imagined a mouse might see in a barn owl.

"As near as I can tell," I said, "*ibani* can mean components or fuel. *Atikka* has to do with personal relationships between individuals of equal status. The *eu* form suggests that both of them are good, so obviously I am missing something major. Please help my understanding."

Screet leaned forward and opened his beak. All I heard was a rapid series of high-pitched shrieks. Both translator and notebook had gone dead.

"Out of the room. Now," Knox said. "You're fired."

While packing the next morning, I learned that I had not been fired. I was, however, off the interrogation team. My new schedule had me reviewing the reports from the interrogators and the tech team translators, and brainstorming with the other linguists. This still left me with free time. I spent most of it in the cafeteria, osmotically soaking up what the other teams were doing.

The biologists were arguing over pronouns. "You keep referring to Screet as 'he,'" one said. "I don't think you can justify that."

"Really, Tom," his companion said, "political correctness is so twentieth century."

"You're missing my point," Tom insisted. "I agree that we have established that Screet's people reproduce sexually. Screet may even become male eventually. But right now, Screet is prepubescent. None of the machinery has been activated. Those quick readings I was able to get—"

His companion, suddenly alert, made shushing motions. Tom flushed and bit his lip. Apparently, they had subjected Screet to some sort of covert (x-rays? Sound waves?) examination that was close hold even in this cleared for classified cafeteria.

The biologists were not the only group with internal disagreements. "It's bogus!" one of the engineers shouted, the second day after my "firing." "They are all Maelzel circuits." His companions laughed and began to clear their trays. I went over and sat down across from the speaker, whose security badge announced him to be Henri Maillardet.

"Maelzel circuits?" I asked.

"You have read Poe?" he countered.

"Long ago," I said. "People being buried alive, or murdered and stuffed up chimneys."

Maillardet shook his head impatiently. "He wrote an essay about an automaton called Maelzel's chess player, explaining that the gears within it were misdirection, and that it was a concealed human who manipulated the automaton. We are in a similar situation. We are astounded by the complexity of the components of Screet's starship. We say that they are beyond human understanding. Bah! That is because there is nothing to understand."

"They say that any sufficiently advanced technology would be indistinguishable from magic," I said.

Maillardet snorted in disgust. "Clarke's third law. Sir Arthur should have been shot making a statement that excuses so much shoddy thinking. If he had realized how it would be used, he probably would have shot himself."

"That ship did not come from anywhere in our solar system," I reminded him. "It is a real starship. Estimates I've seen say that what we have learned from Screet has already pushed our materials and nano technologies fifty to a hundred years ahead of where they were."

Maillardet's smile was contemptuous. "Junk jewelry," he said. "A fistful of pretty baubles for your island."

I studied him carefully, wondering how much of this was paranoia and how much might be the result of insight. "Let's say you're right," I said slowly. "Half or more of the components of the starship are dummies just meant to look impressive, but they do nothing. I can't believe that is normal engineering practice for any species. Why would his people do that?"

"That is what I cannot figure out." For the first time, I saw the fear beneath his bluster. "He says all he wants is help to get home. That is a lie, but I have no clue what the truth may be."

Knox's displeasure made most of the linguistics teams reluctant to pick me up. I was given a mass of material estimated to be three times the size of *War and Peace*. It appeared to be a racial epic of some kind. Ancient and probably fictional, it had nothing to do with People of the Air technology. It was just the sort of thing you might give to occupy a loose cannon and keep him from making trouble.

It had half a dozen different titles. One of them was *Eutik Si Euban*.

I skipped through it, trying to get a sense of what I was dealing with. Most of it was narrative. In the ten sections I sampled, there were more than fifty individuals mentioned. There were complicated charts which turned out to be clan lineages. Descent appeared to be both matrilineal and patrilineal. There were maps. One showed a mountain range, another an island chain. It took me a while to realize that they showed identical portions of Screet's home planet.

The People of the Air had clawed their way up to civilization on a planet which suffered periodic catastrophes. Human myths recount one great flood. *Eutik Si Euban* referenced a dozen, as well as three ice ages and numerous cataclysms that read like asteroid strikes.

That was as much as I could get with a 5 percent vocabulary. I made notes of possible meanings of nearby words from context, but it was slow going. This was an old document. I suspected that half the words were archaic or obsolete. Still, two themes showed up repeatedly. The first was of a race struggling to create a civilization despite a planet which often seemed bent on their extermination.

The second concerned a shadowy enemy called the Doubles who launched repeated attacks over intervals of centuries. At first, I could not be certain they actually existed. The accounts used terms meaning "treachery" and "corruption." I thought the Doubles might be a metaphor, a way of saying that opponents were not even members of the same race. The more I read, though, the more that explanation seemed unsatisfactory. Time and again their threat recurred. There were tragedies when trusted friends or clan members were found to be Doubles, and also when true members of Screet's race were killed in the mistaken belief they were Doubles.

I would have given a lot to have had Screet clarify matters. But the repairs to his ship were nearly complete. He would be gone in a week. In the meantime, I was not allowed to talk to him.

* * *

Four nights later, Knox asked to see me. We had not spoken to each other since he pulled me off the interrogation team. I knocked on the door to his motel room and entered. When I opened the door, the first thing I noticed was the half empty bottle of Scotch on the table. I could smell it from the hallway.

"Come in, Mr. Gonzales. I wanted to talk to you. You know that our friend is going back to his home in the stars in a few days."

"That's what I hear." Knox did not invite me to sit. I felt more comfortable standing anyway.

"All the way home. Five thousand light years to birdland. Must be a long, lonesome trip. Sreet must think so, at least. He's asked for company, a human to accompany him. Something exotic for the folks back to Cloudbase." He paused, waiting for me to say something. I let him wait.

"He has asked for you," he said finally.

"Really?"

"Oh yes indeedy. Caused quite a stir. You're not considered prime ambassador material by some. So after a lot of argument, they came and asked me. What do you suppose I told them?" He smiled as if inviting me to share in a joke.

"I have no idea," I said.

"Course you don't, 'cause I haven't made up my mind yet. But what should I tell them? What do you think?"

And there it was. I had defied his authority from a burning desire to learn more about the People of the Air. Now I would be able to learn more than all the rest of humanity . . . if I was willing to beg.

"I think," I said carefully, "that I remember somebody saying that it would be dangerous to risk offending Sreet. A man who did that would have to be really sure of himself. He would have to pit his opinion against that of the entire CIJUS team. He would have to be willing to risk having Sreet return home with no human ambassador and with a bad opinion of the human race generally.

"The man who could do that . . . Well, no one could say that man got his start by sleeping with the boss' daughter. No one could say he rose to prominence by brown-nosing his superiors and stealing the work of his subordinates. Absolutely no one could say that he was promoted beyond his level of competence ten years ago, and got his current position through political pressure.

"I would really have to respect that man. I'd like to shake his hand."

The smile had vanished some time ago. "Get the hell out of my room."

"Yes, sir," I said. "Right away, sir."

The next morning, I learned officially that Sreet had requested that I return with him to his home world.

The Star Spear

Technologically superior though they might be, Sreet's people had not been able to create artificial gravity. As a result, my diet was filled with calcium supplements. My nodule had its own exercise machine complete with six different resistance stations and a stationary bike. I had to put in at least two solid hours every twenty-four hour period to stave off muscle atrophy and osteoporosis.

Sreet had a similar problem but a very different way of dealing with it. He would take a food cube, which looked like some combination of grain and hamburger, and seal it inside an extremely resilient plastic ball which he called the lure. The lure had two unevenly-sized "wings." Sreet would fling it at a wall while turning on a

system that forced powerful air currents through small holes scattered through the nodules and corridors. The lure would take a strong bounce, be seized by an air current and sent spinning in a random direction. Sreet would throw himself after it, endeavoring to anticipate the trajectory of its next bounce while fighting the artificial winds that were trying to smash him into the walls. If he caught the lure in the minute before the winds shut off, he got to eat the food cube.

"Hunting," he informed me, "stimulates the appetite."

Usually there was a few seconds, warning for me to grab my sleep netting and press myself against the bulkhead. When we were one thousand light years out from Cloudhome, there was an unannounced feeding hunt. Air screamed out of a nozzle at my back, pushing me to the center of the nodule. I heard a bounce in another part of the ship and then the lure hurtled past. An instant later, Sreet slammed me into the wall and pinned me there.

The sharp points of his beak pressed against either side of my throat. Hot breath felt like it would burn my skin. "Why should I not have my meal now?" The voice of the translator was remarkably calm.

I thought of and discarded half a dozen answers. "It would be a waste of all the resources you have used to get me this far," I said carefully.

"Sometimes one must cut losses. Know when to hold and when to fold."

"You can't kill me before I break both your arms," I said, reasonably sure it was true. I was stronger, and Sreet's bones were hollow.

"*Star Spear* responds to my voice. I need no arms." The beak twitched. Small globules of blood drifted across my line of sight.

"True," I said. "But then you would have *euban* rather than *eutik*."

"Yes." Sreet said. He leaned back and let his beak snap shut. His expression conveyed something that might have been approval. "Perhaps you will not get us both killed."

I released his arms. One powerful beat of his wings and he was gone. With shaking hands, I rooted through my first aid kit until I found a bandage to apply to the punctures. Why had Sreet threatened me? How had I convinced him to let me go?

Eutik Si Euban is divided into sections called generations. In generation fifty-three, there is the story of the Two Rahnee'ahs. Rahnee'ah was a clan leader of the Ice Knives Escarpment. One day he left on a solitary hunt. A storm came up suddenly and he was presumed lost. Thirty days later he returned to the clan aerie. His story was that he had been blown into a Doubles encampment and taken prisoner. He had managed to escape after weeks of torture.

Six days later, a celebration was held in the Great Hall to mark his return. But in the midst of the feasting, the singers fell silent. A flyer had landed on the balcony overlooking the Frozen Sea. He staggered into the room, his feathers torn and burnt in some places, his broken arms hanging limply from his sides. In an unrecognizable voice, he proclaimed himself Rahnee'ah, escaped from a tribe of Doubles who imprisoned him, hoping to learn enough to send one of their own to take his place and lead the clan into destruction.

The Clan Sergeants immediately imprisoned both claimants and conferred among themselves. Both Rahnee'ahs wished to lead the Clan against the Doubles. The one which was a Double would surely lead them into an ambush. Thus both honor and self-preservation necessitated unmasking the Double.

Both knew Clan history, though the second Rahnee'ah seemed confused at times. A Double would be expected to have learned such things, and momentary confusion could easily be the result of rough treatment. The first looked exactly like Rahnee'ah, but a Double would naturally be able to mimic one of the People of the Air, especial-

ly after having weeks to study one as a captive. The injuries of the second were consistent with the way Doubles treated the People of the Air, especially the broken arms. Even more than for humans, hands were the symbols of civilization, of abilities the People of the Air had which Doubles did not. That was the reason Doubles delighted in smashing hands and breaking arms.

(It was also the buried memory of that which was the reason I had responded the way I did to Sreet.)

After days of being unable to determine the true Rahnee'ah, OverSergeant Kl'awt'tik brought the young heir, only three seasons old and unfledged, into the Council chambers. The young were known to have a more sensitive sense of smell than their elders. Surely the heir would be able to discern true from false.

It was brought into the room and told to go to its father. In one corner, it saw a battered creature with broken arms, burned feathers, and a voice that was barely a squawk. In the other, the image of its father, the second face it had seen after birth. It was to this Rahnee'ah that it ran.

The OverSergeant grabbed a spear and hurled it at the child. The battered Rahnee'ah threw himself in the path of the spear, taking the full impact of the blow. The OverSergeant turned to the other claimant which had stood motionless, declared it to be the Double, and ordered its immediate execution. He then turned his attention to the battered claimant. The OverSergeant had flipped the spear as he grabbed it, throwing it butt end first. It had only bruised the true Rahnee'ah, who had instinctively dived in front of it to protect his heir.

The first time I read this story, I thought the point was Rahnee'ah's love for his offspring. I also thought of Rahnee'ah as the hero of the story, especially since he appears in several other adventures. Rereading it now, I began to think that I had missed the most important point. To the People of the Air, the OverSergeant was the hero, not simply because he unmasked the Double, but because of the way he did it. He had not thought to throw the spear when he sent for the heir. That was a moment's improvisation, a test for which the Double could not draw on memorized answers.

One final note. The OverSergeant raised the true Rahnee'ah to his feet and declared him Eutik. In ordering the execution of the Double, he calls him Euban and says "Let him and all his kind be devoured." At this point in the text, one of my colleagues had added a footnote. "Devoured in this sense is clearly a metaphor for being overwhelmingly defeated."

Only, maybe not. Maybe it meant what it meant. *Eutik Si Euban*. Friend or food.

Before leaving Earth, I had spent three twelve-hour days with scientists and diplomats who had tried to give me instructions on how to respond to every possible situation. None had contemplated that Sreet might decide to kill me because my mental processes too closely resembled those of an ancient racial enemy.

It was time to throw the book away and play jazz.

I kicked myself into the control room as Sreet was plotting the last jump. The Lagoon and Omega nebulas glowed brilliantly ahead of us. Sreet's system was roughly halfway between them. I drifted over until I was just out of reach. His beak looked terribly sharp.

He stopped what he was doing as soon as he became aware of my presence.

"I have an important question," I said. "Just how stupid do you think we are?"

"That is a difficult question." Difficult as in requiring much effort. Difficult as being potentially embarrassing. This was Sreet's idea of humor.

"Your story has been that your ship made an emergency jump from a supernova and just happened to emerge in our solar system. There are six hundred million stars within five thousand light years and you just happened to find ours."

"*Star Spear* had to emerge somewhere," he replied. "Any destination would be equally unlikely."

"You fell into our system along a path which crossed Earth's orbit not far from Earth itself. Only that wouldn't happen until we had enough time to modify a space craft built for another purpose. I multiply the odds of all of these things happening by each other and I get a number so big I don't have a word for it."

"As it was, *Stellar Bounty* nearly missed its launch date. What would you have done if it had?"

"*Star Spear's* engines would have begun to fire sporadically," Sreet said. "Just enough to allow it to be captured by Earth's gravity."

I nodded. "So the whole story of being caught near a supernova was a . . . fabrication." I hoped that would translate as something better than "lie."

"Of course," Sreet said. "You have just realized this?"

"No. The thought occurred to a number of CIJUS officials even before you were brought to Earth. The more we examined your ship and questioned you, the more official opinion shifted in that direction."

"Nothing was spoken," Sreet said.

"They could not be sure," I said. "No one wanted to offend you needlessly."

"Except you."

I shrugged. "It seemed important."

"Is important."

"Why?"

"*Eutik Si Euban*. Many Doubles stories you have read. Over centuries, we do not understand them. First, we think them magical, otherworldly. Then a competing tribe. Later a divergent race, broken away from our own in the past before awakening. Difficult to be certain since all are killed long past. We think."

"We learn wave function drive. In the stars we find . . . ruins."

Images flashed across my visor: a world of blue vegetation and green seas. The point of view descended and hovered over an island that had been turned into a city of mounds. Light and air entered through a series of thin, rectangular slits. Any passageways, if they existed, were enclosed tunnels. There was no movement. As the point of view flew across the island, I saw sections which had collapsed, creating pits five or six stories deep.

An abrupt shift. Now Sreet's people were on the ground examining what appeared to be catacombs of some sort. Within were mummified corpses of creatures the same apparent size as Sreet but with a body plan more closely resembling crabs. An oval headless torso supported by four hooved legs. Two antennae between one set of legs, presumably defining the front of the creature. Two strong, shovel-shaped arms.

"Mound builders," Sreet said. "Like your technology of nineteenth century. All extinct. Records say extended warfare. First thought, engineered disease. Genetic exam shows two distinct races. The originals and their Doubles. Originals killed first. Then natural die-off for Doubles."

"Dating is not easy. Approximation: their Doubles appear within one thousand Earth years of our Doubles. We kill ours. Success kills theirs."

I stared at him, trying to work through the implications of what he was saying. He saved me the work.

"Hypothesis: approximately three hundred thousand years ago unknown Destroyers swept through our sector of the galaxy. Identified potentially technological species. Developed Doubles to take the place of the originals. Succeeded with Mound Builders. Struggle made my people stronger, faster, smarter."

"You are looking for the Destroyers," I said. "You want to find them before they come back to see the results of their handiwork."

An untranslatable squawk pierced my ears. "Most certainly do not want to find them yet. More than a quarter million years ahead of us. We look for allies!"

"Then why not tell us?" Not that I could imagine CIJUS volunteering to jump into the middle of an interstellar war, but at least we would have been able to consider our options more intelligently.

"Two known races, both with Doubles. Then you. Humans had Doubles or not. If yes, three choices: Doubles destroyed; battling still; humans destroyed. Must learn which."

I thought of the old legends of doppelgangers and shape shifters. A different part of my mind remembered that there once might have been a similar contest between human and almost human. The Neanderthals lost. Maybe genocide could be a good thing.

"How would you be able to tell?" I asked.

"Intelligence creates, improvises. Doubles mimic, memorize rules. Nothing new, no innovation."

Screet had been especially interested in improv comedy, jazz and poker. Now it all made sense. To be sure, there were rules to all three, and you needed at least an intuitive understanding of those rules. But even a perfect understanding was not sufficient. You had to know which rules could be broken and when to break them.

"You broke rules to ask important questions. I thought: this is true human. Humans might fight Destroyers. I chose you to come back to the Council of Aeries, convince my people that human could be allies. I would achieve puberty.

"Leaving Earth, you become quiet. Questions are small and few. I fear a mistake. Error dangerous to the People. Solution: test you to breaking. Ask a question for which there was no old answer. Prove yourself or die."

I shook my head, trying not to start shaking again. *And if I had been having a bad day? I wondered. Suppose I was too frightened to talk? Or just surrendered to my combat training reflexes? Would both of us have died?*

"So I have passed your test," I said. "Do I now negotiate a treaty with your Council of Aeries?"

Screet said something the translator did not pick up. The *Star Spear* responded. I blinked, having lost my train of thought. The scene on my visor shifted abruptly. Beneath us, white clouds swept across a blue world which, even from this height, was clearly not Earth. Two vessels, bristling with projections which certainly looked like gun tubes, fell into position on our flanks. They herded us towards a space station. Only when a vessel looking like the *Star Spear* passed in front of it did I get a clear sense of its enormous size.

Screet concluded a conversation with our escorts and turned his attention to me. "No. You passed my test. Now you must pass the test of the Council.

"With fortune's favor," he said brightly, "we both survive." ○

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MESSIAH EXCELSA

E. Salih

E. Salih tells us he is a “youngish Londoner working in finance. An amateur photographer and untutored writer, ‘Messiah Excelsa’ is my first story. It’s a time-travel story, because they have always been my favorite stories to read. I am not a musician, but I liked the premise of the world’s most coveted Stradivarius violin and the colorful characters that have figured in its history (and I liked the challenge of weaving a yarn through all the conjecture).”

Ten miles yonder, on the left shore of the Po, arose the sanctum citadel of a thousand wishful dreams. On cue, the string quartet I had recently acquired in Palermo launched into Handel’s *Air* in F major—a challenging recital upon the forecastle of an uncouth East Indianaman.

The mighty *Serendip*, laden with spice, heaved with purpose: vast grey-brown hempen sails furling above; dusky cordage tackled on the quarter—swarthy, strong-armed merchant seamen hauling heavy line, exchanging salty bonhomie. And center stage, wielding a scrimshaw cane, strode pug-faced Cap’n Bill, barracking, bawling, happy as punch. Pleasures abounded: the padana plain (on the patella of Italy), green velveteen stretched to the far horizons; *Serendip*’s sharp prow slicing through luminous blue water creating ripples that swept into a backwash of frothy turquoise. Ahead, upriver, neath a gathering of soapy-white clouds, the beckoning turrets of Cremona sparkled with lemon spring light, while inside me airy butterflies tickled well-tugged heartstrings. My mission was bold: to meet with the maker of the Messiah and to claim the creation for my own.

Ha-llelu-jah . . . Ha-llelu-jah . . . Ha-llelu-jah . . . Subversive rejoicing (G.F. Handelwork yet unwritten) underscored my advance on the City of a Hundred Towers, where glory awaited.

Post arrival, my confident masquerade—“Prince Sander Janivou of south sea Cerise”—endorsed by the premier East India coterie, ushered me into all the best *soirées*. With sartorial pomp I commanded respect from the dandyhood, with royal aplomb I displayed two statuesque dandizettes—who drew the green-eye of Ladydom—a saintly smile and a demon hand at *primero*. And when out and about my Arabian-horse-powered *equipage*, ivory-white from fetlocks to forelocks, turned Cremonese heads like Roman busts on swivel stands. And I, maned in *perrucca* tresses—King Louis style—blithely throwing coinage at the feet of shoeless bambini, offering passage to well-heeled gentry, high grade snuff proffered with grandiose courtesy. Then one evening, *fête champêtre* at Piazza

del Comune: accompanied by my Sicilian players, standing on the "preacher's pulpit" outside the ornate Duomo Cathedral—Madonna and child centered in a portico neath the thirteenth century rose window—a celebrated castrato sang trilling arias to delighted folk, outrageous cadenzas soaring to the summit of the Torrazzo, highest tower in all Europe.

That night greater heights of performance art were scaled by this self-styled libertine with the assist of a lady *magnifico* twin set and the *Kama Sutra* teachings. Post coitus I renewed the pledge, revised the plan: stage one, an offer of work. And so one fine heyday, having breakfasted indulgently—soft-poached quails' eggs atop butter-fried olive bread soaked in brandy sauce and sprinkled with *grana padano*—I settled on my English Queen Anne chair, eased into my French Regency desk, Indian-inked a non-partisan goose feather and penned a calligraphic breve that was duly dispatched by my vassal valet. It was Monday 3rd May 1734 AD.

The next day the tall, thin, elegant, venerable old man perched upon chaise longue in the summer parlor commanded my full attention: "Please forgive my coarse employ of your fine language, Signore," I said, foisting a large platter of Cremonese torrone—miniature Torrazzos—into famous hands. "I am a stranger to these shores; where I hail from news of your divine craft reaches us with delightful regularity." I could see the sugary flattery was as agreeable to my illustrious guest as the toothsome nougat confection.

That I had bypassed decadent Venezia—home of *contemporanea maestri Italiani* Tiepolo, Canaletto and *il prete rosso* (the red priest), Antonio Vivaldi—in favor of Lombardia offered further "princely" testament.

No disrespect to the noble Venetians, but the man sat across from me, *luthier non-pareil*, *liutai ne plus ultra*, ninety and still going strong, was a master's master. He that signed his work "Stradivarius."

Herein, I must confess that on first sight of Antonio Stradivari my emotive reaction was not awe but chagrin. For this admirable personage was evidently *not* the self-same Italian rendered in the seventeenth century portrait, youthful and delicate-featured, viol in hand, that hung in the showpiece-lounge of my future, even allowing for the bodily decrement of some three-score years—as visualized in the digitally aged image in my memory's eye. That oil painting, veracity guaranteed, provenance assured, come via rogue Frenchman J.B. Vuillaume, I then realized, was most likely some local two-lire musician. The "error" would forereach, being reproduced on a fifty centesimi note issued by a Cremonese bank in 1870. *Fake money!* I noted with regained good humor. I metaphorically defaced that faux canvas, along with the virtual upgrade, and looked anew. The *real* Stradivari bore an aquiline visage, clean-shaven and olive-skinned, though admittedly the texture was more parched prune—a worn-in leather face, with matching saddlebag jowls. Aside from a few white downy patches he was hairless, some of the front teeth appeared to be ivory replacements, and he possessed small, somewhat beady eyes, that lacked the sparkle one might expect of such a gifted individual.

But one feature stood out like a prominent virtue: the Roman nose. Indeed classical virtues bespoke his polite, personable disposition.

Yet, to own the truth, Antonio's *voce* overlabored somewhat. Too many superfluous honorifics and excessive adulations tipped forth from his thin lips, obsequiousness unbefitting a headliner returned to History's grand pageant, embarrassment-inducing, though I endeavored not to betray my inner feelings, for an extraneous play-actor barely a quarter the master's age. A master-craftsman, I reminded myself, who had created over a thousand of the finest instruments of music, had fathered eleven children, and buried four sons along with his first wife, Francesca.

Burying children, infant and adult, was a common tragedy for one who had sired

so many and had lived so long. But sadness did not cloud the countenance of Antonio Stradivari, maker of violins, nor reveal itself in the musical cadences of his regional dialect, or I was not disposed to recognize it.

I was disposed to largesse. The sumptuous spread, prepared overnight by a buxom cook and two kitchen maids, set upon a lavish table of gilded gold leaf under watchful eye of major-domo, was worthy of a Roman Emperor's main course: salami, mortadella sausage, grocchi dumplings, spicy *mostarda di frutta*, *zuppa alla pavese*, and sundry "stufolo" in silver saucepots and tureens, with hot black coffee and cool white vino on tap. It went mostly untouched. He was disinclined to feast, while I was busy feasting on his presence—up close and cordial!

The lore of a workaholic being never out of work clothes was dispelled there and then. He wore a rather fetching porcelain-blue silken three-piece, the French-style waistcoat and breeches embroidered with due care, though I did catch a compromising glimpse of the brocaded coat's fustian lining. Not so dissimilar to my own apparel, after a fashion, and after due deference, unspoken, in the matters of materials, maiden hours and expense, for I favored a Royal blue silk (Eastern silk, naturally) velvet ensemble with gold and silver gilt threads, that surely out-stitched even the finest luxury silks of the Italian peninsula entire. After all, I was purportedly a blue-blooded, born-to-the-purple, emerald-landed personage with deep pockets to boast, leisure time to fill and extravagant whims to satisfy, and a 1704 first edition of Giorgio Grevio's *Thesaurus Antiquitatum et Historiarum Italiae* as my shopper's guide. A grand tourist! ("The Grand Tour" of Europe being de rigueur for the educated sons of kings and noblemen.)

I tried to look beyond the aged public face. What made him tick? I saw no stuff of greatness. I felt no thunderous force of Nature. Was he aware of his final triumph? Certainly he knew his minimum worth. I had been pre-warned, by a friend of his, that despite being semi-literate he was a savvy businessman: prepared to negotiate, but never to undersell himself, which considering his priceless legacy was a rich irony. Was the fawning an occupational affectation? A disarming tactic?

I recalled from my history books that artists and artisans, beholden to grandee patrons, had to be paragons of felicitousness even when requesting late payment (more so overbearing papisticals). Verily, my über-hospitality was encouraging the overcooked ham, a charm offensive invoking the spirit of Baldassare Castiglione, masking ulterior motive.

I had decided not to broach the Messianic matter. It was a damnable itch. Like meeting the world's foremost playwright in ye olde English inn, carousing him unto a suitably Shakespearean mood, then fighting the urge to steal a verse or two. Delay incurred risk, for Time, even play-time with coitus courtesans, was not a libation I could imbibe indefinitely.

Deferring shoptalk, we discoursed on the weather, culture, and day-to-day life of Lombardy; the architectural splendors that lay within the medieval walls of the City of Towers, and the provincial merits beyond.

Also politics—the rule of present-day Austrian governorship over later-day Spanish, which accounted for the dashing colorful Austro-Hapsburg troops, that flavored a Germanic air to the *Zeitgeist*. For "Italy" was not yet a unified kingdom, rather a collection of co-existing states mostly under foreign-nation control—until Napoleon's aggressive territorial claim at century's end. He spoke about his grandchildren, now grown, borne of eldest daughter Giulia (more would follow care of youngest son, Paulo, after Antonio's passing). Naturally, I had to mention his advanced age, a proud achievement curiously attributed to a daily tincture of brandy and nitrate water.

And I called upon my faux history of a fabricated Malay archipelago, regality recounted with deft humor, or Machiavellian mistruth. It was an artful seduction; soon

enough I would throw every caveat to the wind, press forth an undesired want and in doing so likely offend him—not to mention the established order of the known Universe. “I look forward to visiting you at your workshop, Magister,” said I, after the no small matter of the commission had been set out.

In age-old tradition our right hands met. I do confess I had to refrain from kissing the aged, liver-spotted master hand (fifty years earlier a curtsy might have beheld me what with the then fashion for formal doublets with matching tabbed skirts!). Thus I felt hopelessly embarrassed when *he* extended the courtesy to *me*. Then it was over.

With tears exuding from my eyes I watched him, aided by cane, amble down the cobblestone avenue, moving as cautiously as a ninety-year-old of stooped mien should, away from my red-terracotta palazzo just off del Comune, clearing a homeward path to his prized possession just as the iron knell of the Torrazzo echoed loud in the warm, fetid air of Cremona, befouled by the stench of horse manure and human excreta.

The following morning, I presented myself at the door of No. 2 Piazza San Domenico, an imposing three-story family abode, and was warmly welcomed by the mantua-gowned mistress of the house, Antonio's second wife, Signora Antonia Maria, about sixty-five. I did forgo royal silken wear for the garb of *gentiluomo di campagna*—copper-red dress coat, cravat, buff breeches, Hessian boots, gold-trimmed three-cornered tricorni upon periwig—no doubt one of many well-to-doers to pass through this master's threshold, though I fancied that none had rolled up on a four-horse chariot of purebred stallionry—for a half-furlong journey!—and I doubt that man or boy was ever so excited, for my heart rose forth like a kettledrum crescendo of a crude music hall opera.

Madame led me upstairs to the attic/atelier. As I entered heaven-scented aromas assailed my pleasure-senses. My giddy eyes danced around the busy room: sturdy work benches and chairs, old-timbered like the decor of a retired galleon; luthiers at their work stations; little string clippings and wood shavings scattered about like godly confetti. Worthy body parts abounded: backs and necks fashioned out of the finest flamed maple from Croatia and Turkey; bellies, tailpieces, and fingerboards shaped from close-grained spruce, pine, and boxwood of the local Dolomites (*la foresta dei violini*); slender waists and curvaceous bouts of seasoned sycamore and darkest ebony; and little rib-linings of russet willow, all ready for the skilful application of ancient-Egyptian hide glue—a pungency that lingered. But most potent was the fabled varnish. For sitting pretty atop raised shelves, amid glass jars of exotic viscosity and powdered crystal, were stringed and unstringed baroque violins, violas, violoncellos, mandolins, guitars; and more violins!

Within this fragrant inner sanctum, the old craftsman who proudly displayed his handiwork was more dignified, less hunched, than of previous encounter, his manner eschewing good-for-business servility for a more wholesome civility. He was surely enamored by my overt delight, but it was more than that. It was as if the collective aura of his world-famed creations had infused his very spirit. Indeed his doll's eyes seemed to widen and vitalize, illumining and sparkling, like the glassy sheen of his ubiquitous, iridescent, lush-red beauties—lush and *succulentus* like toffee-coated wine sap apples. I caught sight of the latest master cello hung out to dry on the terrace-seccadour, welcoming the sun's assistance.

So many piquant pleasures: an open pine chest, master-crested (A.S. and cross-in-circle), filled with wooden molds; an assortment of pine sound post sticks; an incisor-shaped piece of hematite, used for burnishing; a heavy iron for rib fashioning; a clamped down carapace, like an upturned turtle shell; a flower vase filled with tuning pegs, another with sabled paintbrushes; an acoustic diagram; a paper model. . .

In the warm Heliosine light my marveling eyes were reacquainted with the master's tools of toil, here in their natural habitat. For those illustrious, industrious, con-

summate hands, sprinkled in sawdust—like his dusted *fabrolignario* attire: white trousers, shirt, leather apron and white cotton cap—were truly at home. The fingertips worn, coarsened from years of masterly service. But his creations sublime, free of the patina of age.

And when he, matter-of-factly, picked out a “sample” violin I felt shivers course through my ganglia. To see a brand new Stradivarius in the hands of Stradivari! Well, it was like witnessing Michelangelo unveil his “David,” or observing Da Vinci capture the enigmatic smile of Madam Lisa Gherardini of Florence.

What a violin! Tangerine aglow. A victory of superb purfling and inlay work, dyed pearwood and Indian ivory respectively, with an elaborately carved scroll and curcive, gold-trimmed *f*-holes, to further enrich the timbre of *picea excelsa*. A Kingly *objet de vertu*. I asked him to play a few chords. “Better yet,” said he, offering me his newborn, “You fiddle.”

I held the feather-light baby in my arms, having first removed my magisterial frippery, and he passed me a bow. I assumed the pose, then stroked the strings to tease out a sonorous wail of cosmic purity that I focused into melody. Mere words are unfit to describe the sheer power and richness of tone—of voice!—that resonated through that inspired covenant of wood and gut string, which filled that humble room. If music has a soul, here was it.

“*Appassionato!*” he declared, creasing his face with a smile, “*Maestro di violino.*”

“*Grazie,*” I replied with immeasurable pride, “I have some prowess for the violin, but an instrument such as this elevates my skill as never before.” I breezed across a few bars of Vivaldi, testing the spring waters of his seasonal fare (and debuted only a few seasons ago), then drenched myself in a tremelo out-pouring of autumnal glory. With strings perfectly tuned a fifth apart to the notes *g*, *d*, *a*, and *e*, I coasted the wide octave range.

I was almost carried away, with the sound, with the music, with desire. I wanted to play Haydn, Mendelssohn, Mozart. Yes, Mozart! But I held firm, averting a major paradoxum. For those classical composers were future tense.

I returned the marvel to its maker and instantly felt the loss. With effort, I composed myself. I noticed the various tools hung casually from straps of parchment on one of the wooden support beams: calipers, scrapers, planes, knives, gouges, hammers, chisels, and spare clamps—the commonplace implements would one day take pride of place in a museum dedicated to his life and craft and christened with his name. He noted my wandering eyes, apologized for “the disarray,” but I saw only order.

I inquired into his working methods: *Forma Interna Sistema* and its virtuoso-serving aesthetic, for both the intimacy of the chamber music salon and the grandiosity of operatic auditoria. The dynamic symmetric principles of Vignola. Timber: his preferences, the differences therein. A Stradivarius violin is comprised of seventy pieces of wood—from at least half a dozen tree species—selected ostensibly for their acoustic qualities. However, decorative aesthetics varied with the remuneration of the commission. Of course, even at the lowest price, the craftwork was never compromised. Regarding fundamentals, he led me to a hefty trunk section of maple tree, sliced open like a half-eaten gâteau, revealing delightful grain (the next tiger-striped slice to serve as the back of my instrument); and (for the front) a corresponding block of “quarter-cut” Alpine spruce.

And I sought to settle a long-standing dispute among historians: Who had instructed the young Stradivari? Was it the wood-carver Francesco Pescaroli, or the luthier, Nicolò Amati? Or, as I believed, both men? Yes, he had *two* mentors, the latter, Nicolò, sole survivor of a luthier dynasty all but wiped out by of the plague and famine that devastated Cremona in 1630 (who notched up eighty-eight years). Grandfather Andrea Amati founded the *Grand Amatise Style*, now surpassed by the

Stradivarius Grand Pattern. Andrea had formulated the original "Cremonese varnish"—a golden-yellow gloss concocted, as I learnt, from tung oil, arabic gum (acacia seyal and senegal), root of curcuma, turpentine, honeydew and sugar (and no mention of the urine of virgin girls!). Stradivari's early works utilized the formula. But what, I asked eagerly, did the Master use to effect the dramatic change from golden-yellow to lustrous red. The reply astounded me. Dragon's Blood! The explanation: a resin procured from the berries of an Indonesian rattan palm (*Calamus Draco*), the lurid liquid extract held in glass upon the shelves. Traditional Cremonese varnish would soon become a lost formula, foolishly disfavored by the mass-producers of Mittenwald in Bavaria, and Mirecourt in France, for fast-drying spirit-base coatings that leadened tonal quality.

With each question I revealed my admiration, and with each answer I secretly revelled in gaining knowledge and insights that had eluded and confounded centuries of musical cognoscenti. Verily, the varnish formula was common knowledge, at least in the neighborhood, yet my inquiry into mineral grounding—wood treatment—was politely deferred. Had I stumbled onto the "Stradivarius secret," the ultimate answer? His reticence gave credence to the notion, but I did not wish to rouse suspicion by pressing him. As he spoke, with a young man's passion, as I listened, like a child enthralled, it was hard to concede that the glory years had passed. Antonio Stradivari's "golden period" is officially stated—post factum—as 1700 to 1720. 1716 was *the* peak year.

After 1720 eyes weakened, powers waned; the Master slipped from the summit of supremacy to a lesser peak: high grade, but fallible artistry. As for the assistants, there were two, each over fifty and unmarried, both named Stradivari. The patriarch's eldest sons, Francesco and Omobono, were more than competent, but neither was a worthy luthier-heir apparent (the talented Giovanni might have been had he lived). They assisted dutifully, performed repairs, constructed in-house violin cases; that particular morning, Francesco was roughing out a viola d'amore, Omobono accounting.

San Domenico defined Cremonese violin making. Carlos Bergonzi lived and worked next door, and No.4 was Casa Guarneri, home of the famous Guarnerius violin clan, Giuseppe "del Gesù" Guarneri being the colorful star and second only to Master Stradivari in quality and legacy—and, dare I say, rivaling the Master on current liuteria form.

There was no sign nor report of Giovanni Battista Guadagnini, whom some sources named as *non famiglia* pupil, but which actuality repudiated. Clearly he imitated from afar. G.B. born in Piacenza, was known for making alterations to Strads years after the originator's death at the behest of one Count Cozio di Salabue.

Inferior copyists would surely multiply, meeting the growing demand for violins from quartets and amateurs (and their non-prodigious children). In 1734, however, it was clear from the number of unsold instruments in the Stradivari *laboratorio* that, elite commissions aside, the competition from over the Alps, compounded by the economic slump of recent years, had reduced business, rendered surplus stock. For like a true artist the *patro* could not stem his creative talent.

Many hours had flown by, and I was surely outstaying my welcome. Reluctantly, I bade the master craftsman farewell, the order promised forthwith, the advance, four gold Imperial ducats, tendered by my insistence, the remainder on completion. I would gladly have paid in diamonds.

Leaving the premises I envisaged for that night the sweetest of dreams. I barely slept. Turbid thoughts rattled my mind like the formless *melée* of an avant garde opera.

To have gotten so close to that which I coveted! But where did he keep the Messiah? I fretted over it. That master's masterpiece was the holy grail of violins and he

guarded it jealously, since the summer of 1716 when it had been immaculately conceived, if you may forgive the pun. I alone knew its plotline: On Antonio's death, at age ninety-three, in December 1737 (three years hence), a few months after his loyal wife's demise, the superlative Stradivarius would pass to eldest son Francesco, until his passing in 1742. And then, with the prior loss of Omobono, and in the absence of Giuseppe, the priest, youngest son Paolo, the cloth merchant, would claim ownership. From him, the great violin collector and ardent Stradivarius admirer, Count Cozio di Salabue, a cultured nineteen year-old, would purchase the instrument in 1775 along with twelve remaining Strads and numerous workshop items, as related in his letters and memoirs.

A half-century later, the violin would fall into the eager hands of Luigi Tarisio, an ill-attired "peasant" of impeccable grandee taste in all matters musical, and a guile to match, who on his visits to Paris would gleefully taunt the Parisian dealers with tales of the most heavenly instrument on Earth, but not reveal it, thus inspiring the time-honored appellation, as anointed by the French violinist Jean-Delphin Alard: *"Your violin is like the Messiah of the Jews, Monsieur, always expected but never appearing."* Old Luigi accumulated hundreds of worthy violins on his travels. Yet Nature is wont to halt those strolling the colorful byway of Life with their heavy hoard. Upon news of the notorious Tarisio's death—rigor mortis in a tableau of squalor—one man, a Frenchman, raced across Europe to be the first to reach an Italian farmhouse, in the Northern village Fontaneto d'Agogna, where glory resided, where poor relations of the filthy departed knew not what they had.

For waiting to be uncovered in the attic of this ragged dwelling were cherry-picked delights: Stradivarius violins of the finest (still ripening) vintage, stashed away like the guilty secrets of a convict. Several in an old rickety cabinet, the *one* of most repute lying ignominiously in its bottom drawer, albeit within a finely crafted case festooned in ornamental arabesques. The uncoverer, luthier Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume—native of Mirecourt, resided in Paris and, ironically, Jean-Delphin Alard's father-in-law—by his own report, was rendered speechless by the glowing jewel unveiled, for he knew that the Messiah was that overused descript of rare justification. It was priceless! Subduing his elation, Vuillaume unbuckled his money belt and, regarding all that he saw, offered all that he had: eighty thousand francs. The fool relations, who had previously referred to so much "dirty junk," hastily accepted.

The never debuted Messiah had forsaken almost one and a half centuries of musical advancement: Classicism, Romanticism, and Italian opera, then trumpeting the march for unification—and been denied a host of concert virtuosos. Ignoble tradition continued as the purchased instrument left Italy for France, kept for some twenty years in a smug Frenchman's display cabinet; having first been disassembled, measured and studied. Then Victorian England beckoned "Le Messie," as star exhibit in a London museum show, and then back to France to deceased Vuillaume's inheritor: Professor Alard of the Paris Conservatoire no less, but he was old and his tenure was brief.

Across the decades—imperiled more than once by the armies of European warmongers—the unexampled violin would change hands like a gambler's pot in a game of *Triomphe Forcée*. And sometime in the fiddle-playful 1920s, the wealthy American automaker and dilettante Henry Ford, reputedly waving a blank cheque, had procurement in mind. But the fate of the immaculate one was literally sealed. In 1939, the Messiah would be donated by the Hill family, British middlemen of many of the transactions, to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England, where it would be kept (or imprisoned!) in its final resting place, locked behind laminated glass. Secure. Silent. Never to see the light of a Nature's day lest it fade, never to be played lest it become careworn; within human reach, yet a world away from skilled hands. An alluring, forbidden treasure.

An objet d'art suspended in time. As if it had only last week sat upon the workbench of Antonio Stradivari, only yesterday been second-coated and sun dried. It was said to be the ultimate communion of aesthetic form and tonal magnificence. As unique and divine as the Universe.

But not universally adjudged. As the legend grew there arose doubts. The doubters, or troublesome dissenters let us say, claimed that such a perfect specimen of a perfect craft was too good to be true. Vuillaume was well known for his slavish copies of the Italian masters and, when he possessed that nation's superlative, would often challenge his guests to distinguish the fake from the genuine article (and, if truth be told, this immodest man had made "modern" alterations to the Messiah, of which he was only transient possessor: installing a new inner base bar, to further amplify acoustic power; an angled neck, to better suit handling; and imposing a decorative tailpiece—the nativity of Christ). The inference being that Tarisio assisted the Frenchman in a grand deception.

Dendrochronology, the study of tree ring grain to date timber back to its nature removal—the width of each growth ring defined by that year's climate—scientifically refuted the accusation of nineteenth century fakery to the satisfaction of the violin establishment, maintaining, it must be said, the lucrative status quo. But the naysayers persevered, claiming that the innate craft of the Messiah was only "typical" of an early eighteenth century Strad; furthermore, that its fronted spruce wood was Alpine timber felled not in the years before 1716, as was concluded, but in 1738 or later, the years after Antonio Stradivari's death. As loyalists would say: *Inexact science is a bastard son, provenance is King!*

But like a sea-borne coffin the matter would not peacefully rest. At the dawn of a new millennium the true iconoclasts stepped forth. Armed with years of climatic data, a team of university scientists presented their evidence against the world's greatest violin maker: an assertion that the secret of Stradivari's unusually fine instruments lay in a "Sun-glitch." That reduced solar activity in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries—the "little ice age" named Maunder Minimum—had slowed tree growth, densifying the wood that was utilized to the acoustic betterment of Stradivarius violins (they at least did not question luthiership).

This "weather tight" argument was conjectural, unacceptable. An affront to proven artistry. Had these experts paid homage to Antonio Stradivari and received his musical blessing? Ever communed with a Stradivarius? Felt the sensuous harmonics caressing their soul, emotions resonating through one's being, from sinew to nerve, head to toe?

Logic was curiously selective. For if all the Cremonese artisans of the time, using timber from the same sources, utilizing common tools of trade, were likewise advantaged by Nature, then why are their legacies not equal to Antonio's lavish opus? (And within a few years of the master's demise all the principals in the "Town of Ten

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Thousand Violins" faded away, as if a higher power had decreed that none were worthy enough.)

Yes, it was undeniable that so many Stradivarius instruments *were* diminished by the ages: botched repairs, re-varnishings, woodworm, wear and uncared for, leaving so few concert-worthy specimens—those of honorable namesake, such as "Alard," "Vioti," "Paganini," and delightful sobriquets such as "Dolphin," "Jupiter," "Red Diamond"—even for those who *could* afford the stratospheric auction prices, thus making the Messiah so special, and my historic contact so important, so timely. But Time was running out, opportunity closing like a medieval drawbridge, the heavy chain of coming events ever tightening.

I renewed my invitation in letter, but it was politely declined via another—"I beg you will forgive me, alas . . . kissing your hands and making obeisance . . ."—penned with vigor but replete with poor grammar and errors of spelling. But once more did I meet the man behind the legend, apogee of the school of Cremona, epitome of the luthier's art, *maestro liutaio perfetto* to whom production-line expedience was anathema. I went to his home to collect my brand-new, late-period Stradivarius, signed and dated Latin style—and if either son had offered more than a minor role in creation then the violin would justly have been labeled, "*Sotto la disciplina d'Antonio Stradivari.*"

It had taken him ten days to forge this musical masterstroke: a brilliant ruby-gem, flaming sword sound-holes, ebony-veneered fingerboard and bridge, with arching that fell off in gentle and certain curves and a proud-statement tailpiece of exotic jujube; with many an eye-pleasing embellishment, but also a servant to the practicalities of traction and torsion. Naturally, I named the violin "Prince Janivou," to compliment the Prince Khevenhuller, Menuhin's childhood Strad, made in the previous year, 1733.

Where once this conferment would have elicited joy, it was for me, ultimately, a muted pleasure. The solution to my imbroglia of woes was cogently clear, and had been from the very outset of my storied adventure, for in my heart of hearts I knew that he would never sell that which I desired, though I swelled in riches. Finally, I yielded to temptation.

I care not to recall the dead-of-night larceny, except to say that with delayed perception the secret repository was revealed to me by him: when, on the first atelier visit, I had handed back that Kingly instrument and asked, leadingly, if it were the finest he had ever constructed, and he had modestly replied, "perhaps not," and then he stole a glance at a small pine box that lay in a quiet corner of his workshop . . . I am compelled to recount the shameful act . . . and so, with stealth, navigating the rooftops of San Domenico, I reached the sanctum. I crept inside, hastily broke the lock of the pine box: there lay a black velveteen sack enshrouding the desired objet form. I clasped the sack to my bosom, left a messianic offering and hastened away. Safely in my home, hands atremble, I untied the sack's cord, unleashing a potent roseal aroma. I gazed upon a treasure to burst a thousand hearts, its signature label, visible through the heavenly swirl of an unusually slanted *f*-hole, my proof (as if it were needed): "*ANTONIUS STRADIUARIUS CREMONENSIS FACIEBAT ANNO 1716.*"

It seemed impossibly delicate, deceptively simple. Large, rich, succulent—orangey-red, like fruit from an Olympian vine. With a satin glow. No, an extant radiance. The back: wide-flamed maple; the front, a warm sun-shined butterfly of so humble a spruce; ephemeral, yet timeless.

Such craftsmanship. The smooth, lustred, ebony-brown tailpiece (securing the five strings); the polished classical scroll; the dark-lined chamfer, that echoed the impeccable purfling; the pristine ebony-black fingerboard and tuning pegs . . .

Timeless! Yet my Time had come.

I reached for my Tourte bow. Horsehair met gut string. Then profound shock: Imperfect sound! The arpeggio unnoteworthy. Tone and semitone reduced to a rhyme of mediocrity. I fumbled the pegs in despair. I fiddled on in disbelief. My mind clasped for reason. Eureka! I cried, as sure as an ancient Greek discovering the Golden Mean. The violin was dormant too long. It had to be revitalized; with Music . . .

Glory arose, and sustained. All night, till first light, we sang together, sweetly, vividly, with vibrant *risonanza*; concerto after concerto: soul-nourishing angel songs, where sympathetically attuned heartstrings and aural catechisms willingly bestowed enlightenment. It was as if I had dipped my bow into Apollo's finest nectar and each action elicited another hue from the richest of palettes. The exalted instrument demanded more of me just as it answered every heartfelt question I asked of it. *Ne plus ultra!* (the utmost limit to which one can go).

But my possessive hands had so cruelly snatched the violin from its creator. My penance was deserved—entrapment. You see the logical Universe would not permit *paradoxum ex nihilo*. Divergence was the compromise. The cosmic contingency. As long as I lived—and surely thereafter—there would exist a new timeline. With ironic prescience, I was a voyager in another age of enlightened absolutism. With universal approbation I too was dispossessed. So be it. The Messiah would be my devotion-companion.

I slept awhile, awakening well into that summer's day, the clapping of horses' hooves outside my second-floor window reaffirming old world Cremona. I opened out the window, incurring the odorous air, dimly regarding the cavalry movement, musing on last night's seminal victory. I looked to the table where I had left the *objet magnifique* and felt a blow to my empty stomach. The Messiah was gone! The bow that I had placed by its side now rested on a leaf of paper, a note that I had not written. Striving to reawake, I shook my head violently. Reality persisted. I read the note; just two words in bold cursive letters:

"Pazienza Conte"—Patience Count.

This was insanity, writ in a demon's hand. "Conte"! I was not a count. I was not even a Prince. I was Carl Cozinski, Jr., from distant, upstate New York.

My dastardly anarchy had been revisited on me. Thereafter, my tortured mind explored the whys and wherefores of cause and effect. The effect was non-existent. For there was no report of a theft at the San Domenico home of prosperous Antonio Stradivari. No outraged sons calling for swift justice. No loyal wife denouncing criminal action of the lowest order. No hunt for the culprit, or culprits. Not the next day, nor the next week.

Then one night, as I lay in bed alone, weary from oppressive thought, weak from lack of sustenance, a startling epiphany came to me. A profound insight into extant past and future, a yarn unraveled by a welcome hand. The realization that my true destiny was as savior, not sinner (or deserved victim). The Messiah would once more be mine. But it would be forty years' wait!

Pray imagine, if you will (as I did) the hoax of all time, perpetrated for all time. Where one perfect violin is copied. Where the skilled copyist, sworn to secrecy, utilizes the tools and the single larger-form template-mould that shaped the original half a century earlier, and the choicest Excelsa wood prepared in precisely the same way. Where acoustic-innard and decorative exterior elements are taken from authentic sources, so that half the work is bona fide.

Imagine years of trial and error, defeat and failure (as I am) until there is noble reward: a second "Messiah," the inner voice like an echo, the art of musicology repeated to the letter (A and E, of luscious, beguiling—and blade-sharp—flutelike tones, as alluring as the piper, D, resonant and powerful, like a King's clarion call, or soft

and mellow like an oboe; G, the deeper timbre of an ancient bombardon of penetrating phrase); and the authentic varnish applied to the last brushstroke.

Imagine this hybrid sent forth to act as decoy (to the unknowingly dispossessed), while the *true one* is secreted and cherished by the custodian—just as the maker cherished it—and only a direct comparison would betray the copy, for duplicated de facto of ultimate perfection are ultimately inferior: a tiny flaw in execution, one subtle weakness in tone or timbre, an indefinable loss within the resonance chamber, no matter how imperceptible to a general audience. A master would know.

Stretch your imagination to accept a Time portal, leading the *one-time*-criminal, older and wiser, back to the scene of his crime later on that same dark night via another time-gate (for the gates open temporarily, then lock and bolt); undoing the theft of his younger self, the masterly violin secured inside the original velveteen sack and returned to the master's *laboratorio* pine box (remembering, if he can, to remove the peace offering of a sacrilegious upstart). Would not the consecution of History be restored?!

And if there are loose ends of chaos, a temporal violation, I will not let it trouble me. For perhaps Timelines are like cosmic violin strings: separate yet connected, variously pitched yet vibrantly synchronous, willing to subtend for a noble end.

Now twenty-one years have passed, nineteen remain. A most special occasion. 'Tis today January 27th 1756 AD, a fanfare day for my adored soul mate that is Music. The day a *Grobmeister* has entered this world, in Holy Roman Salzburg. A fine son for Leopold, a noted tunesmith and fellow fiddler. In a mere four years the child will compose a sonata, in another two a concerto. At age seven he will pen his first symphony, the first of forty. And operas—the grandest of operas: *The Magic Flute*, *Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*. . . Music brimming from a man-child's soul.

And I, once more reinvented—Yes, an Italian *conte*—a violin prodigy self-tutored into virtuosity, relocated in *Casale di Piedmont*, will live to meet, to know, perhaps even perform for Wolfgang Mozart. I am in good health, no longer over-indulging in rich food or “medicinal” tobacco, nor demanding ladies of the bedchamber. I will continue to be patient, bide common Time, and care for my newborn son, who will surely take on my mantle when he comes of age (as instructed in the timely note to be written in his noble hand). The noble son who will locate an old-school violin maker from Piacenza, fetched up in Turin, named Guadagnini and commission him to work to a secret plan.

I recall vividly one spring day, a young pretender standing on a castle deck, advancing on historic Cremona, Handel's *Water Music* flowing through the spice-scented air (the exultant chorus of *Messiah* borne in mind), following a dream . . . the dream still in sight . . . Until that time, *il privilegio della lentezza* (with the luxury of going slowly), with a beautiful Contessa by my side, with our little *Count Ignazio Alessandro Cozio di Salabue* upon my lap, Oh blessed Maker, I await your Messiah.

Addendum: In the late nineteenth century, a few years before the tall house of No. 2 Piazza San Domenico was foolishly destroyed, some relics of the renowned former owner were discovered when workmen in the employ of the then tenant were carrying out refurbishment. Signor Soresini chanced upon the laborers as they set about kindling some pieces of old wood to make a cooking fire. On closer inspection he recognized the Stradivarius crest on one broken piece, the top of a pinewood chest. The purpose of the erstwhile chest was unknown yet, curiously, a small piece of “blood-stone,” in the shape of a crucifix, was also discovered. Eventually these remnant relics were sent to a civic museum in Cremona. ○

NEXT ISSUE

FEBRUARY ISSUE

Our February issue hits the stands on Christmas Eve, so we can't judge too harshly if you decide to avoid family gatherings and parties in favor of surreptitious readings of *Asimov's*. (Those of you reading at the table as dinner is served are on your own.) Folks who don't observe Christmas get to curl up with great fiction while avoiding those frantic last-minute shoppers tearing around town—it's a *win-win* for you. And, yes, the issue is just *stuffed*.

FEBRUARY NOVELLA

February's new novella by **Judith Berman**, her first with us since the critically acclaimed "The Fear Gun" back in 2004, is sure to please fans of the linguistically charged space operas of Samuel R. Delany. A young woman, employed against her will by a motley group of space sailors on the living starship *Hajo-aa*, must traverse the mysterious asteroid-cum-spaceship "Pelago," all the while plotting her risky escape. We feel sure this epic, ambitious story will appear on many of your Best of 2009 lists.

ALSO IN FEBRUARY

Next up is a story by **Rudy Rucker and Bruce Sterling**, about a topic no less serious than the end of the world . . . and the crucial role internet bloggers have to play in it. Needless to say, it's both biting and hilarious. **Carol Emshwiller** returns with "The Bird Painter in Time of War," a heartbreaking examination of the collateral damages of conflict on innocents caught in the fray; **Colin P. Davies** questions the morality behind the disposability of non-human citizenry in "The Certainty Principle"; **Matthew Johnson** takes us to Antarctica for a taut examination on tactics during "The Coldest War"; and **Steven Utley** contributes a mordant fable worthy of Robert Bloch where two conflicting personalities attempt to reconcile their differences by taking "The Point."

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg reminisces about his early days breaking into the field in his Reflections column, reminding us "It Wasn't All That Easy"; **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of poetry you're sure to enjoy. Look for our January issue at your newsstand on December 24, 2008. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—by mail or online, in varying formats, including downloadable forms, by going to our website, www.asimovs.com. We're also available on *Amazon.com's* Kindle!

COMING SOON

brand new stories by **Nancy Kress**, **Kate Wilhelm**, **Michael Swanwlck**, **Eileen Gunn**, **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**, **Brian Stableford**, **William Barton**, **Bruce McAllister**, **Michael Cassutt**, **Jerry Olton**, **Chris Beckett**, **Sara Genge**, **Jim Aikin**, **Jack Skillingstead**, **Damien Broderick**, **R. Neube**, **Eric Brown**, and many others!

UNINTENDED BEHAVIOR

Nancy Kress

Nancy Kress's latest book is the bio-thriller, *Dogs* (Tachyon Press). Her newest story, too, concerns a dog, as do two novels she published last year. It's difficult to account for this sudden spurt of fascination with canines. However, the term "unintended behavior" is not zoological. The phrase is tech-speak: It refers to program code doing something the programmer didn't foresee. Nancy tells us that the only way she, not a tech sophisticate, knows this is because her son told her so.

After thirty-six years of miserable marriage, Annie Skepford made the discovery that decided her on leaving her husband. But the truth, when she finally admitted it to herself, was that the girl on the phone was almost irrelevant; Annie had just had enough. Thirty-six years! But at least at this late date, a separation wouldn't matter much to Carol, married and living on the other coast, or to Joel, a grad student at a college the farthest away from home that he could get himself accepted. To Annie's surprise, it was the dog who objected to a divorce.

"No," Beowulf said. He had only worn the animal-speaking thingie for a few weeks and Annie still wasn't used to it. She never would have bought it for him. But Don was a technophile and an early adopter of every weird gadget on the Net. Their fourth-floor apartment was networked, localized, and MEMS-ed, although Annie wasn't sure what that meant. Don never explained. He only rolled his eyes and said, "Networking is the most powerful tool of this century. Don't you ever read *anything*?"

"What did you say?" Annie asked Beowulf. An instant later she felt like a fool. She had read the package insert that came with Beowulf's thingie, which said that the ridiculous little helmet atop his head scanned Wulf's brain waves. The scan identified both his emotional state and those "cognition areas" that were showing greatest blood flow at any moment. The helmet then produced pre-recorded audio of what a dog might say if it could, in your personal choice of fifty-six voices. Wulf "spoke" in a light, musical tenor, which Annie thought ridiculous for a Borzoi the size of a small armchair.

"No," Wulf repeated.

"No what?" She couldn't believe she was doing this. Having a conversation with a dog.

"No," Wulf repeated, looked away from her at a pigeon on the apartment window sill, returned his brown-eyed gaze to her. Wulf had a small head set proudly on his powerful, graceful hound body, and an aloof and aristocratic air that could intimidate Annie even before he could "speak." Borzoi were inextricably linked with Russian royalty. Annie, by contrast, felt dumpy and weak and old, sitting with her balled-up handkerchief in a faded swivel rocker, her eyes swollen and achy from crying.

Probably Wulf meant "No, don't cry." Dogs could pick up on human distress. Or maybe he meant "No, don't neglect my walk," which it was now time for. Or even "No, don't change routine"—hadn't she read an article someplace about dogs that could detect minute changes in human pheromones, and so tell when their owners were about to have seizures?

Annie had decided on a life-changing seizure. Except that she wasn't sure how to go about it. How would she live? Don had always earned all the money, budgeted all the money, controlled all the money. They didn't even have a joint bank account, much less credit cards in her own name and . . .

"Annie!" Don's voice called. She grimaced, hid her handkerchief in her palm, and swiveled her chair to face the TV. Don had rigged it up to the computer in his study, with some sort of cameras that showed his face when he called. He called several times each day.

"Did you pick up my gray suit at the cleaner's?"

"Not yet, Don."

"No?" His eyebrows rose. "Why not? What on Earth were you doing with yourself all morning? And why are you crying?"

Now. She could do it now. Just say the words outright: *I'm leaving you. I can't stand this life anymore. You treat me like a child, or a machine. I'm out of here.*

She couldn't do it.

"I'm not crying."

He gave a sigh of impatience masquerading as patience. "Right. Whatever you say, Annie. But make sure to pick up my suit, and get a case of Guinness. My poker club is coming over tomorrow night. Or did you forget that, too?"

"No, Don."

"Good." His face vanished from the screen.

Annie started crying again. She said to Wulf, "I have to get out of here!"

"No," Wulf said, and this time there was a shade more firmness to "his" voice. Was he on Don's side, then? Don had bought him and Don disciplined him. But it was Annie who fed Wulf, walked him, took him to the vet, brushed him, talked to him. She said to the dog, "You don't understand."

"No," Wulf said, which could have meant anything.

He became more chatty on their walk. Annie took him to the dry cleaner's and the grocery store, staggering home with the gray suit over one shoulder and a case of Guinness on the other. Wulf offered "I want to chase that cat" and "That woman is afraid of me" and several repetitions of "This smells interesting!" He wagged his tail and offered "Hello!" to Jimmy the doorman, who said "Hi," warily. As Wulf and Annie crammed into the building's small elevator, Wulf said, "I'm hungry."

"I'll feed you when we're upstairs," Annie said.

"Good! Thank you!"

She smiled wanly. In a way, Beowulf was good company. At least he never made her feel like something left over from a different century.

As she approached the apartment door, it unlocked itself, keyed to the chip that Don insisted she carry in her purse. The lights turned on. The refrigerator opened itself for Annie to put away the beer. As she closed the door, the refrigerator said in a silky female voice, "We are low on milk. Did you buy milk?"

"No," Annie said. She knew that the fridge, unlike Beowulf, was not speaking from any perceived emotion; Don had simply programmed it with recordings that reflected its scans of the UPC labels within. But Annie hated the refrigerator's nagging almost as much as its seductive voice. Why did Don have to give it that voice? Because the refrigerator was what he wished Annie could be: sleek, efficient, obedient.

Wulf said, "You seem upset. Can I fetch anything?"

He looked at her with tender light-brown eyes, but Wulf had never been trained to fetch. And what could he have fetched her, anyway? A cup of tea? A stiff drink? The name of the girl who had phoned Annie at noon to announce her affair with Annie's husband? Wulf didn't even know what he was saying. The choice of words was forced into his mouth, just as Annie's always were. She would never have the nerve to confront Don about the girl.

All at once Wulf stood erect and sniffed the air. A low growl formed in his throat. The computer screen sunk flush with the kitchen wall brightened and announced, "A rat has invaded the kitchen."

How did it know that? Don had put various detectors—infrared, motion, God-knew-what—around the apartment. Maybe they were linked to the computer and could identify size or body heat or something. Wulf snuffled at the cabinet under the sink. Gingerly Annie opened it, but nothing came out. Now Wulf was nosing the base of the kitchen island, where Annie kept cereals and baking goods in a small cupboard. She flung open the cabinet door.

The rat leaped out and began a dash across the kitchen floor toward the bathroom. Wulf cried "Kill!" and was on it instantly. He clamped it in his powerful jaws and the rat shrieked, a high inhuman sound, before Wulf shook it and bones snapped.

Don's face appeared on the screen. "I heard the alarm—what's he got, what's he got? A rat! Good boy, Wulf! Annie, how the hell did a rat get into the apartment?"

Slowly she looked away from the dead body in Wulf's jaws. Borzoi were bred to chase wolves in the Russian forests; she'd had no idea that one would kill a rat. Or that Wulf's artificially supplied vocabulary included that gleeful "Kill!"

Don never raised his voice, not ever. Now he said quietly, "Rats come in when housekeeping falls below standard. Haven't you been keeping the place clean?"

"Ready to receive garbage," the garbage pail said, opening as Wulf moved past it with his rat.

"It's time to start dinner," the refrigerator said.

"I'm leaving you," Annie said.

"Don't be ridiculous," Don said. "You have nowhere to go."

He was right, of course. As soon as his face had disappeared from the TV, Annie faced that basic fact all over again. She could pack a bag, but then what? Don gave her just enough household money for two or three days, and even if she hadn't spent most of the current allowance, it wouldn't have been enough to buy even a bus ticket to Carol, or to Annie's sister in North Carolina. Even if she could stand her sister. And if she could get to Carol, what kind of life would that be? "You're a doormat, Mom," Carol had said. "As long as you're here anyway, would you mind taking the garbage downstairs?"

Wulf said, "Stay here." He had hidden the rat someplace and stood beside Annie, pressing his small, graceful head to her side.

He meant only that he sensed she was about to leave him alone in the apartment and he didn't like that. He'd said the same thing last week when she'd had to see the doctor about her blood pressure. You couldn't bring a dog to the doctor's. But Annie looked at him in wonder.

"You're right, Wulf. It's as much my apartment as his. And I've . . . I've earned it."

But how to do this? The first step was easy enough; lock the doors. Not the e-locks, which were always on anyway, but the deadbolt that was standard equipment on all New York apartments. Annie pushed it into place.

"It's past time to start dinner," the refrigerator said reproachfully. Annie got a pair of scissors, found the wire that connected the scanners inside the fridge to the microphone outside, and cut the wires. A minute later Don's face appeared on the kitchen screen.

"Annie! What's going on there? What happened to Leila?"

Leila. The voice of the refrigerator was Leila. The girl on the phone, the live girl, had been nameless. There was no way to turn off the kitchen screen, which was built into the wall, but surely it must be connected to the main computer in Don's study? Annie went there, Don talking at her all the way: from the kitchen screen, from the living room TV, from the computer on his desk. She crawled under the desk and unplugged everything she found there, but Don's voice didn't stop.

"Annie! Are you—"

Back-up. Batteries or a generator or radio waves or something. The whole apartment was one big machine, and Don expected—had always expected—Annie to be part of it, one more cog or chip or whatever machines had nowadays. No more.

"Don, you don't live here anymore."

His face paled, so white that for a wild moment Annie thought he might faint. Instead, shockingly, he said quietly, "I know you never loved me."

That was true, but she didn't know that Don knew it. The realization burned along her already charred nerves.

All at once he barked, "Why did you ever marry me?"

Because you were there. Because all my friends were getting married. Because you knew about cars and taxes and machines and I thought you'd always take care of me. Because nobody else asked. But she couldn't say those things, and before she could say anything else, color rushed back into Don's face and he said, "If you think you can just—"

Annie marched out of the study, slamming the door. A deep part of her mind said *That was our last chance*, but the words seemed meaningless. In the living room she unplugged the TV, and Don's face disappeared. However, the kitchen screen had no controls. Annie took the hammer from the kitchen drawer and smashed the screen.

"Help! Help!" shrieked the security system. "Intruder! Intruder!" A wailing siren pierced the air.

Was a signal being sent from the system to the security company, to the police? Of course it was. Amazed at herself, Annie picked up the phone, hit the memory button, and shouted over the din, "Ballinger Home Protection? I'd like to report a false alarm. Actually, I think there's something wrong with the system. I can't make it stop, and there's been no intruder here!"

"Name and password?"

Annie gave them. A few moments later the noise stopped. "I'll have to send a technician to repair the problem, ma'am, but I can't get one there until tomorrow."

"Oh, that's fine. Just . . . just shut down the whole system until then."

"Are you sure? You understand that you will be without—"

"Just shut it down until tomorrow!"

He did. But the instant after Annie hung up, the phone rang again. Don. She lifted the receiver to be sure, hung it up again, then removed it from the cradle and left it off.

In the study Don was still calling to her; she could hear the sound but not distinguish any words. But then, all at once, his voice was clear and loud in the room, and she froze.

"Annie. Stop this right now. Do you hear me?"

The sound was coming from her pocket. Annie fished out her cell and there was Don's face. It had hardened, like setting cement. Annie marched to the window and opened it. She peered out to make sure no one stood in the courtyard below. Then she dropped the cell four stories down onto the pavement. October air drifting through the open window cooled her face, her trembling hands.

What else? Nothing else here could order her, command her . . . All at once the house burst into madness.

Lights blinked on and off. Doors to the microwave and the dishwasher banged open and shut, open and shut. The toaster went Pop! Pop! Pop! The blender whirled.

Networking is the most powerful tool of this century. Annie screamed, but a moment later, contempt flooded her. A tantrum, that's all it was, no different from the tantrums Carol had had when she was four, when she'd bang her head against the wall or kick her heels on the floor. Don was behaving like a spoiled four-year-old.

Maybe that's all he'd ever been. And maybe if she'd realized that decades ago, not been so afraid of him . . . but no. They were just too different. Two fundamentally different sorts of people.

Cautiously, Annie approached the kitchen. The appliances continued to bang and whirr and pop, but they couldn't actually *do* anything to her. She looked up at the smoke alarms, but they weren't sounding; presumably Don didn't want to alert the building super, who'd always seemed to prefer Annie over Don. But then, Annie hadn't treated Luigi like just another machine. Sometimes Annie—oh, not now, but years ago, when she'd been younger—had fantasized that Luigi was actually her husband. She lived with him in his cheerful little apartment behind the stairs. He cooked spaghetti for them. He called her "Cara." They laughed together at movies that showed sleek-haired barbarian women fighting ghouls while dressed in high-heeled boots and gleaming golden bras.

Beowulf sat under the still open window in the living room, whining softly. When Annie stroked his head, he said, "I don't like this."

"I know. But it's all right, Wulf. Look, I'm going to unplug all the lamps in this room and we'll just ignore the noise in the kitchen, okay? It'll be fine."

"I don't like this."

To get the overhead living room light to go off, Annie had to stand shakily on a chair, unscrew the glass fixture, and remove the three bulbs underneath. She closed the door to the bedroom, where the alarm clock was changing radio stations like a drunken trucker. Annie lit candles in the living room. After ten more minutes, the kitchen appliances stopped.

The living room, bathed in the soft glow of candlelight and with twilight closing in outside, fell into silent peace. Wulf went to sleep at Annie's feet. She sat in her rocker, trying to think what to do next, although it was hard to think when the apartment was so warm . . . so very warm, especially considering the open window . . .

Annie jumped up and checked the thermostat. Eighty degrees and rising. She pushed the button to turn off the heat, but nothing happened. Well, if Don thought he could *broil* her out, he was wrong. She opened all the windows as far as they would go and took off her sweater, shoes, and socks. There was food in the kitchen, food that she could eat without cooking it; she was suddenly afraid of the oven and microwave. And water—

She ran into the bathroom. Only a drizzle of water came out of the tap. Don had somehow turned it off. But there were two gallons of bottled water in the fridge . . . in "Leila." Carefully Annie opened the refrigerator and pulled them out. Nothing happened. Leila was vanquished. For a long moment Annie held the water bottles, one in each hand, against her fevered cheeks.

Emboldened by victory over the refrigerator, Annie went into the bedroom. Here it was even hotter. Methodically she went through the pockets of Don's pants and jackets, something she had never done in thirty-six years, as well as through his dresser. She found \$246.83, a box of Trojans—Annie was post-menopausal—and a love letter from Joanne. So that was the girl's name. Joanne couldn't spell, Annie noted with scorn. The scorn felt good.

Was \$246.83 enough for a plane ticket to Carol in San Diego? Maybe. But Annie didn't feel close to her daughter, who was so much like Don, and she didn't like San Diego, which always seemed to be smoky from wildfires. And she could hardly go to Joel, living in student housing. Also, she realized, she didn't want to leave this apartment. It was hers now, earned by years of enduring brusque orders and patronizing

comments and domestic labor. Annie wasn't budging. The young women of today had it right: Hang onto what was yours.

She tried to think it through. Don would be home soon. He would bang on the front door, and she wouldn't open it. If he did fetch Luigi, Annie would yell through the door that Don had *hit* her and she was afraid to open the door. Luigi would call the cops. No, that wouldn't be good—if the cops came, they'd see she had no bruises and they'd let Don in. So maybe she could—

"Annie!" Don's yell—so loud!—from the living room. Annie froze. She had unplugged the TV, had unplugged anything that could . . . Wulf raced into the bedroom.

"Annie, what the fuck do you think you're *doing*?"

Don's voice, coming from Wulf's helmet. How could he do that? Some sort of wireless voodoo . . . but what struck her like a blow was that Don was *using* Wulf. As if Wulf were just one more appliance. Springing toward the dog, Annie tried to yank off the helmet. Don's voice continued to come from it.

"I'm nearly home, Annie. And when I get there, you're going to have a lot of explaining to do. What makes you think you can disturb my tech, wreck my possessions, disorder the life I've worked my ass off to give you—"

My. My. I. My.

The helmet, held by rigid metal straps under Wulf's chin and around his collar, wouldn't come off. Don continued to grate, and now it seemed to Annie that his words were somehow hurting Wulf. The dog trembled and his brown eyes turned beseechingly to hers. Was Wulf just afraid of the unaccustomed shouting, or was Don's fury somehow going through Wulf's brain—that brain connected to the technology on his innocent head?

"Stop!" Annie cried, even though she knew Don couldn't hear her. She went back into the living room, sweat coursing down her forehead and between her breasts. The thermostat said eighty-six degrees. Annie took off her blouse, standing by the window in her polyester slacks and Playtex Eighteen-Hour bra. Gray curls frizzed around her head. The dog followed, whimpering.

The e-locks on the front door lit up. Banging started on the reinforced wood. "Open up, Annie! Damn it, open up!"

She stared at the door, her hand on Wulf's trembling back.

"Goddamn it to hell, you'll regret it if you don't open up!"

Annie stood still. Did the neighbors hear? No, the rest of the fourth floor was still at work. Now Don would call Luigi, call the cops . . .

He didn't. Nor did things in the apartment start going wild again. Instead Annie heard a low, intense whine outside the door, like a dentist drill. Through the tiny crack between door and frame, just above the deadbolt, came a thin beam of red light.

The deadbolt began to cleave apart. Don had some kind of laser-y saw.

She was frightened by the strength of her rage. It felt primitive, as if the back of her head was being swamped by a dark wave: a powerful and barbaric rage she had never before known. Wulf shuddered under her hand. Connection ran from her to the dog and back again, the kind of deep connection she'd once, long ago, dreamed of having with Don, with her husband. But this electricity didn't come from hardware or wireless or any sort of technology. It came from bone and blood and flesh, burning along Annie's nerves like old, old fire. Annie *was* Wulf, the Wulf whose ancestors had coursed wolves on the Russian steppes, the Wulf with the rat in his jaws, even as she was also the rat itself. She was the substrate, the microcode, the starting point.

The deadbolt broke and the door burst open.

It seemed to Annie—later, when she was only herself again—that the dog moved even before she spoke. "Kill!" she said.

Wulf leaped, and got Don in mid-air. ○

UNCLE BONES

Damien Broderick

Damien Broderick is the science fiction editor for *Cosmos* magazine. He published his first short story collection as an undergraduate at Monash university in Melbourne, Australia, and has since written twenty novels, seven of them with Rory Barnes, and a second collection. Damien has also compiled six anthologies. His most recent book, *Year Million* (Atlas & Co.), asked leading scientists and science writers to imagine the fate of humanity or the universe a million years in the future. Damien's first story for *Asimov's*, "Resurrection," appeared in our August 1984 issue. We are pleased to welcome him back to our pages with a decidedly different look at that theme.

I never liked the way Uncle Bones smelled. Elaine said I should just zip my lip and keep my opinions to myself.

Bones smelled like . . .

Well, it's hard to be precise, if you've never met a Stinky. Ever stuck your nose near a dead thing? I don't mean a piece of steak fresh out of the freezer. That's dead cow kept cool and clean. I'm talking about *dead and disgusting*. We tried to make a joke out of it, Bones and me. It was an old gag he'd heard from his grandfather, who was also Elaine's granddad, of course, my great-granddad:

"My dog has no nose."

"Yeah? Then how does he smell?"

"Terrible!"

Ha ha. But it's not so funny, being a walking dead man. Once I overheard Bones talking to my mother. "It's better than being six feet under," Bones said, "but only just."

"It's a *lot* better than being six feet under," Elaine said, and her voice broke. "If they'd brought John back, I'd bless every smelly cell in his poor dear body."

It's hard to know how much I actually remember about my father and how much I know because I've seen the vids. He's teaching me to catch a softball, or jogging along the Riverwalk with me on his shoulders. When he left to go fight in the Saudi, he hugged me so hard it hurt. I was only like three but I remember that.

We had a Social Studies class on the Stinkies. Sorry, I'm the last person who should use such an ugly word. "Revitalized citizens." That class got me thinking, and maybe ended up killing me. I didn't really know that much about Bones and exactly how he got that way. It's not that I never wondered. But he just didn't talk about himself, and that became a kind of unspoken rule. Mrs. Bartle's class made me want to know anyway. Maybe it would upset Bones, but hey.

That afternoon I rushed through most of my 'work, then went into the family room, kind of nervous, trying not to show it. I took a deep breath, and then wished I

hadn't. The room was rank, even with the front window open a crack. My uncle never wore a mask indoors, and hardly ever outdoors for that matter, so he was stinking up a storm just breathing. He glanced up from his look, and I blurted out, "Hey Bones, I've been wondering, um, how long ago did you, uh—"

He said, after a silent moment, "Spit it out, son, I won't bite."

I swallowed. "—did you, you know, die?"

He frowned and said in his whispery voice, "Twelve years, Jim." He looked at the top of the news page, at the date, and I saw his cracked, dry lips moving silently. "And four months," he added. "And a few days."

No wonder I couldn't remember it. Three years after I was *born*. Oh. Of course. Both of them probably.

He sighed. "The army medics patched me up, even though I was going stiff already when they found me. Brought me halfway back, best they could do. Anything else on your mind?"

All the things we never, ever talked about. I swallowed even harder. "So you and my dad . . . were you with my dad when—"

Elaine was in the kitchen getting dinner ready, but she obviously had her ears pricked up because she came galloping into the family room and whisked me away.

"Sorry, Bonaparte." You know how mothers are. She took me firmly by the arm. "Don't be nosy, Jim, it's rude." Over her shoulder, she asked, "Can I get you anything to drink, Bones? We're out of milk, but Jimmy can run down to the shop and get some." "Milky coffee would be good."

Elaine put me out the back door with the exact change, including coins. She didn't like to use cards, too easy to scam. I was supposed to go the extra three blocks down to the convenience store and gas pump place on East Courtland to get a big carton of milk because the price was about \$3.40 cheaper than at the McCullough Grocery at the end of our block. We don't have much money, I guess that should be obvious, and Elaine often said she didn't have a buck or a moment to spare, but when Bones came to visit he expected her to look after him hand and foot. He came and went without a word. Bonaparte Hector Jones had been Mom's older brother when he was alive. Well, he was *still* her older brother, except you didn't exactly think of dead people that way, like family. Unless someone got in your face about it.

Coming back from the store, I took a short cut across the corner of the car wash on McCullough Street. Elaine didn't like me cutting through the car wash because she figured someday I'd get run down by a monster hydrogen-guzzling sport utility vehicle piloted by some weedy accountant who figured he was the shit. I wished I'd listened to her when I remembered the Boofhead brothers were working there after school. Bill dropped the gushing hose with the brush on the end. With a happy whoop, he caught me before I could get to the street, jerked me off my feet, and his brother Sam kicked me in the ankle. It was like being stuck in some old Simpsons episode with all the bullies yelling "Nyah-hah!" I dropped the carton of milk when I fell over and wanted to see if it'd spilled, but if they saw me looking they'd jump on it and waste it all. My mother would finish off whatever was left of me after the Boofheads got through.

"You stink, gayboy!" Bill yelled in my ear. Spittle sprayed the side of my face.

With brilliant wit, I said back, "You stink," clawing to get free. I felt sick and frightened. Sam shoved me in the gutter. "You're the dirty Stinky-lover!"

It's true I never liked the way Uncle Bones smelled, but that doesn't mean I'll put up with some stupid shithead mocking people who live in my own house, especially my own flesh and blood. Even if they don't have blood, and their flesh is flaking off. But Bill Boofhead was yelling in my face. "He's associating with *gnome fellas*, Sammy, that's what this creep's Stinky uncle's doing. *Associating with gnome fellas!*"

Not a clue what the prick was talking about, and I didn't care much because he was squeezing my mouth so hard my teeth ached.

A pasty-faced guy crossed the street, baseball cap wrong way round, bill in front, and for a mad moment I thought I was saved. What he gave the two Boofheads was a filthy look. Gee, thanks. Bill stared right back at him. The guy sniffed and sidled past, then turned back.

"You okay?" he called out to me.

Yeah, right, bozo. Happy as a mud crab in crap. Sam was shoving me along in the gutter, banging at my bruised ankles, and Bill was trying to fit my right arm into my left hand pocket.

"Just having *some fun*, aren't we, stinky?" Bill said with a sneer.

I croaked something. It was getting hard to breath. Bill had his armpit right in my face, gag a maggot. I wished I had Dodger with me. The Dodge was my main man even though he went to a different school, over six feet tall already and not even a year older than me. I'm more the stocky, low-to-the-ground type. It's not just that Dodge is bigger and tougher than me—he'd get mad. His older sister Ashanti was the only other Stinky I knew except for Bones. Not that I'd ever met her. She never left their house.

The old guy came a bit closer. "It doesn't look like *fun* to me," he said. "How about letting him go, you thugs?"

"Yeah, sure." Sam made a horrible wet noise and spat at the ground. The loogie was a big green one, sucked backwards out of his nose, and it hit the concrete about an inch from the guy's shiny 'boks. "What're *you* gonna do about it?"

The guy pulled his foot back quickly, and the look on his face said he wanted to beat the crap out of Sam, but instead he plugged his phone in his ear and starting thumbing numbers. "Well, for starters, call the cops."

That made the Boofhead brothers break up shouting hilariously. They laughed so hard they let go of me, so I took my chance, grabbed the milk carton, and ran like hell across the street, nearly splattered by a bus in the process. I heard Sam yell at the guy, "Hey, great idea, dude. Ask for Sergeant Bouvier." On the far side, half-safe, I stopped to watch. I'm curious, okay?

Bouvier was their father. Huge pot belly and thick red arms covered in red hairs, a red bald head. Like seven feet tall. One time I saw him drag two cursing thugs out of the Bloodhouse on North Main and shove them into his cop car, no sweat.

The Boofhead brothers slouched back to an old Dodge Ram covered in streaky foam bubbles. Half the soapy water was pouring down the drain and the rest ran out on the street. I don't think they got paid much, but they probably liked the job because they could hang around cars. Bill was old enough to drive legally, Sam not quite although he was a year and a half older than me even if he was in the same class. The baseball hat dude had taken his phone off. He caught my eye and shook his head, looking disgusted. I shrugged and ran the rest of the way home. My arm still felt pulled from its socket, but my legs worked, I wasn't bleeding, and the carton had all the milk on the inside. I'd gotten off easy.

As I say, that was the day Mrs. Bartle had ranted on in Social Studies about revitalized citizens, and how we should treat them with respect. Imagine the reaction. Sam Bouvier the Boofhead got out of his seat and lurched around like a zombie, groaning and letting drool froth out of his mouth. Jenny Bean, who loves watching old movies from the twentieth, pulled a scared face and shoved out her tits and whispered loudly, "I . . . see . . . *dead people*," and the whole class screamed with laughter. That made Mrs. Bartle angry and depressed, and she got very scientific about the topic. It didn't stop the sniggering.

I could tell a lot of them were sniggering at me, because they knew about my revie

uncle, and that made me mad—at them, and at Uncle Bones. It wasn't *my* fault we had a dead guy living with us! *Hey, Jim!* I told myself. *Not fair to poor Bones!* My uncle was a good guy. Those times when he came to stay at our place he'd been the closest thing to a father to me. He took me swimming in the Guadalupe River where the water was so clear you could see every rock on the bottom. Sure, people moved away from us, scowling, but we didn't care. I didn't, anyway, not back then; I was having fun splashing about. You could see scars where he'd been shot right through the heart. When I was a Cub Scout, Uncle Bones taught me how to tie knots and play table tennis in the Youth Center, but not for long. He'd been a scoutmaster, before he was killed, but they didn't like having him around there, either.

Mrs. Bartle mentioned *side-effects*, which wasn't real major news. Being turned into a Stinky was the biggie. I'd covered my ears during lots of the lesson, because it made me feel creepy and sick to think about Uncle Bones that way. Barf. So they banned it under some law called the Nanotechnology Terrorism Lumbago, whatever. What they'd done was, they injected my uncle's dead body full of millions and billions of teeny endobots but it couldn't completely stop him rotting inside. And they didn't bother making his heart beat again, because the nanobots shoved oxygen from his lungs through all his tissues, which just about kept him going.

Twelve years ago. Wow. Okay, Bones must have been killed in Saudi, when they were trying out Revitalization. Not just on soldiers who died in the war, either. A lot of revies were offed by criminals or gangs, others got totaled as road kill. A few were very sick kids who died in the hospital, like Dodger's sister Ashanti. But if you just wore out and died of old age, so sad, too bad.

That's all I knew, though. Stinkies kept to themselves, usually, like Ashanti, and you couldn't blame them. Sure, it was better than being really dead and buried in a coffin in the ground—but as Bones said, maybe not that much better. Elaine always changed the subject. She really, really didn't like talking about it.

I went in the back way through the alley, gave Elaine the carton and went straight into my room, past the family room. Its door was closed, and Uncle Bones was talking to someone in his whispery voice. You couldn't tell when someone called him, because he kept his phone on vibrate—he really hated ringtones, said they were “the music of the devil.” And he didn't like being interrupted, even though it was Mom's house, and mine, too, for that matter. My own door was still covered with smartass signs from when I was a little kid saying stuff like GENIUS AT WERK with the last word crossed out and *work* scribbled in. I'd started to clean it off once, but Elaine stopped me. I think she yearned for those days, closer to the time when Dad was still with us. As I closed the door behind me, I heard Bones say, “Look, I have to take a dump. You can leave, or you can wait. My bowels won't.” He sounded angry.

Huh? Bones never had visitors. A moment later I heard him shuffle past in the hallway. I screwed my face up. Probably the *real* reason revies were called “Stinkies.” The stench they left behind in the bathroom . . . You don't want to know.

My look is a cheap old recycled thing, but it works okay. I kicked the chair sideways and sat down. It showed the spaceship *Discovery* in orbit around Jupiter, from my favorite movie, *2010*. The year I was born. I've been airtyping since I was a kid, it's still the best way to score high in the top games. Uncle Bones showed me how to type, come to think of it. I guess by then I'd sort of learned to deal with the way he smelled, and how he looked like a zombie. That's why it made me mad, hearing the Boofs diss him like that.

Anyway, I was suddenly curious, so I Googled on dead people. Mostly what I found was spam, advertising bogus cures.

“YOU CAN LIVE AGAIN! Forget those expensive *masks* and *perfumes*! Walk free

and proud in the *streets*, without people STARING and LAUGHING. For just \$1,999.99—”

They'd warned us about this sort of thing when we were taught how to sort spam from useful information. Criminals tried to suck in revs and scam all their savings and insurance so their skin wasn't rotting, and most of all, they'd be able to get it up again. Pure bogosity, but some revs threw away more and more money because, you know, it had to be true. The skulls worked behind layers of steg, cops following along miles behind, and kept finding new ways to rip off the schmucks.

I kept clicking. Mostly I found pages and pages of hateful stuff about how the Stinkies should be killed again, they were fiends from Hell walking the earth (which I *knew* wasn't true), they should be locked up in those old detention centers where illegals used to be kept.

And more spam, along with all the other shit clogging the net. It made me feel sick.

I clicked on the new game called *Yeah-No*, but I couldn't get into it, and crashed out on the fifth level. I couldn't keep the Boofheads out of my brain. *Associating?* Was that what they'd said? With *gnome fellas*. Some sort of cop jargon they were repeating mindlessly. Why can't voters just say what they mean? I keyed *gnome fellas* into Google, which asked me politely:

Did you mean: *Known felons*

So I clicked and got this, which made me feel cold even on such a warm day:
felon

person of bad or criminal character

I keyed in the whole *associating with known felons* phrase, and found
for example:

While out of jail on probation, he was arrested for associating with hired killers and other known felons

Whoa! I sat back and stared at the look. *Bones*? Hanging around with hit men? Skulls, they call them on TV. *While out of jail on probation*? Poor old lazy Bonaparte Jones had been arrested and charged? What for? I certainly couldn't picture him locked up in jail, it just wasn't him.

Oh well. I clicked the sounds icon, found Jangle Central and clicked it, then turned the volume down. Elaine always said "that kind of racket" gave her a headache. She and Bones only liked classic rap and hip-hop. I grunted along to the rhythm, Googling some more on *consorting*, but it didn't get me any further. It struck me that I could just go and *ask* Bones, once he was back out of the bathroom and settled again in his comfortable chair. Dad's old chair. *Hey, Uncle B, is it true you did time in the big house? And how about that "associating with criminals" thing?* Yikes! Imagine Mom's face, and the pressure of her fingers on my arm as she pushed me out of the family room. Yeah. She'd love that. Calling her poor dead brother a skull, to his face, right in our own house.

Still, it beat messing around on the net and getting nowhere. I slammed my door behind me and slouched into the family room. A huge man in a blue uniform stood up from Dad's old armchair and started toward me. Sergeant Bouvier, the father of the Boofheads. I had no chance to screech to a stop and head back to the safety of my own room like the Road Runner when it sees Wile E. Coyote. He held his arm out in front of him, and it looked like a baseball bat covered with muscle, sunburned skin and red hair. He smelled of some manly fragrance, aftershave or hair gel or something, not that he had much hair on his head.

"You must be the Stokes boy," he said. His thick fingers closed on my own hand and

squeezed. "I'm just waiting for your uncle, we've been talking. Why don't you sit down over here with me, boy?"

Uh-oh. I blurted out, "It wasn't my fault, it was Bi—"

I swallowed my words. The first and second rule about bullies is, you don't tell. The last person in the world to tell about Bill and Sam was their own father. He wouldn't believe me, and I'd be in deep crap because he'd assume I was lying. Worse still, maybe he *would* believe me. If he believed me, he might roust out the Boofheads, and then I was *sure* to hear about it again. And it would hurt, a lot.

He noticed. "Been having trouble with some of the other kids picking on you about Boney, haven't you?"

Did he know it was mostly his own sons? Elaine used to make excuses for Bill and Sam whenever she heard from snitches that they'd got in trouble. She'd shake her head and explain that they'd missed out on a mother's care and attention. Big deal, I'd lost a father in the terrorism war, they'd lost a mother in a head-on traffic crash, it was all so sad, but so what? I didn't go around punishing little kids. I didn't like the Boofhead brothers and they didn't like me, but still, that didn't mean I was about to rat them out. I just nodded.

"I bet they call your uncle a Stinky," the Sergeant was saying. "Dead Meat. Zomboy. Johnny Rotten. Other nasty names like that."

He drew me by my upper arm toward a chair, and sat me down on it.

I really was starting to get alarmed. Had Bones done something truly bad? Was the Sergeant here to arrest him and haul him away? I craned my neck to look through the curtains and saw his cop car parked out the front. Not a social call.

"Look at me, son, we still have those questions."

I looked him in the eye, swallowing hard.

"Okay, young James—"

"Jim," I said. "Jimmy."

"Jim, I need to ask you if your uncle has been acting oddly lately. Staying out all night? Meeting with strangers, maybe?"

I jerked my head around, blinking. Bones should be finished crapping by now. I hopped up and moved quickly to the door into the kitchen. "I'll get my uncle for you, sir."

"Boney will be back," the cop said. He didn't have to move a muscle. I turned sheepishly and returned to my chair.

"Uh, okay." I tried to force myself to meet his eyes again, but stared at his feet instead. Really enormous shoes, very black, a bit scuffed at the toes. What terrible crime had Bones committed? That couldn't be it, or the Sergeant would have read him his rights and locked his wrists in shiny bucky ties and hauled him off to a cell. If you can trust cop shows.

"No need to be scared, boy."

Mom came into the room then, flour on her hands. She liked cooking our dinners, even though she was tired after being in the office all day, she said it relaxed her. "Sorry, Wi— Sergeant. Come on Jim, back to your homework."

"I've finished," I started to say, but the Sergeant interrupted me.

"Please join us, Mrs. Stokes, there's something I'd like to show you both." To my surprise, he was fishing about in the top pocket of his blue shirt. He pulled out a creased old photo and held it out to Mom, saying nothing. She wiped off the last of the flour and took it from him carefully and we both stared at it. She said nothing, and after a moment she let me take it from her hand.

Four young men in some sort of uniform. Maybe they were soldiers, the camo uniforms didn't look like what police wear, all blotches of brown and green and gray. One of them looked like Bill the Boofhead with short hair, almost shaved down to his

skull. With a jolt I realized that it was an old picture of Sergeant Bouvier, when he was way younger. I stared at the other three men. One I'd never seen before. The other two were healthy, smiling fit to bust. One was my father, John Stokes, and the other one looked a bit like Elaine if she'd been a man with a shaved head.

"It's you and my dad and my Uncle Bones."

"Correct, son." The Sergeant took back the photo, slid it into his uniform pocket without another glance. You could tell he treasured it. "Bones Jones and I were friends back during the war. He introduced me and John to your Mom here when we were home on leave, and John was lucky enough to marry her."

"William," Mom said to him in a funny voice, "that's all in the past." She went back to the kitchen, and said over her shoulder, "Don't go filling the boy's head with a lot of nonsense about his father."

I couldn't quite take all this in. Most of my life, Uncle Bones had been a dead man. For some reason he and Elaine hadn't kept any old pictures of him around the house, although there were five photos of Dad and Mom on the mantelpiece and hanging on the walls of the lounge room, and another one in a silver frame next to Mom's bed. Maybe it made Bones depressed to be reminded how young and healthy he'd been, back when he was alive. Well, he didn't smell like a Stinky back then, either.

"He was a hero, you know, your uncle." Sergeant William Bouvier's voice softened. "And your Dad, too, son. Both of them damned wonderful heroes." He sighed. "And only one of them came back. I think maybe your mother blames me for that. But it was nobody's fault. Just really awful timing."

I wasn't sure what he meant. I looked down again, feeling my eyes prickle. I felt incredibly sad, even though I couldn't remember my dad very well.

Sergeant Bouvier shook his head in a sort of unhappy amazement. We were both quiet for a moment, then he added: "I'm sorry, Jimmy. The doctors tried, you know, but they just weren't able to save your father. He'd been dead too long."

I swallowed hard, to make the lump in my throat go away. I didn't want the policeman to see my tears, so I looked out the window again. I thought: I'll bet my dad wouldn't have wanted to get turned into a Stinky anyway.

"Maybe Bones was worried you might be coming to arrest him," I heard myself say.

"And why would I be doing that, Jim?"

"Maybe he was mixed up in something." My voice dropped to a whisper. "A kid said. Something about skulls."

"Hmmm. Where's he got to, anyway?" Sergeant Bouvier jumped to his feet and went to the door, put his head into the kitchen. "Mrs. Stokes," he said to Mom, "I'm getting a bit worried about Boney."

In a rather strained voice, she said, "Not a problem, Sarge, he had to go to the—you know."

"Yeah, quite a while back. You don't suppose he's got into any trouble? Perhaps you could knock on the door and check?"

"I'll do that, William," my mother said. I heard her open the hallway door and close it again. The Sergeant came back but didn't sit down. He was frowning. After a moment Elaine came in, looking panicky. "He's gone, William. He didn't answer, and I tried the bathroom door, but it's locked, and I called his cell and he didn't answer, so I went outside to see if he was in the yard and the bathroom window is open—"

Sergeant Bouvier ran to the hallway, and I scampered after him. With a tremendous crash, he broke the lock of the bathroom, kicking it hard with the heel of his heavy shoe. He looked inside, shook his head. "He's gone," the policeman told us. "The silly man has run off. Now I've got to go chasing after him."

It came together in my head. Bones was mixed up with spam artists. Paying crim-

inals for fake medicines, pissing his pension away? The other possibility made me feel sick to consider it. Was he one of the criminals *himself*? Scamming bogus medications to Stinkies just like him?

No, I *really* couldn't believe it!

Sergeant Bouvier ran out the back, and Elaine stopped me from following him.

"Don't get underfoot, Jimmy."

"I just want to see—"

"I know, but I'm sure Bonaparte hasn't done anything wrong." She saw right through me, smiled in a concerned way, kissed me on the forehead. For once I didn't pull away (I mean, man, I'm way too old for that stuff). "Go play with your computer, son. I'll let you know when we find Bones. Come on, I've had a hard day at work and now I have to finish making dinner."

Sergeant Bouvier came in the back door, out of breath.

"No sign of him, he's not in the alley. I'll have to put out a bulletin. I think he might be in a bit of trouble, nothing we can't sort out. Don't worry, Mrs. Stokes, he can't have gone far."

I ducked my head down, chewing at my lip. I knew where Bones had probably hidden himself. Should I tell them? No, I couldn't believe old Bones was a scummy skell. I didn't want to point an accusing finger at my mom's dead brother. Elaine was looking at the Sergeant, biting her own lip. "I wish you wouldn't get all formal like that, William. Why don't you just call me Elaine?"

"I'm on duty now, Mrs. Stokes. Proper procedure." His red face was getting redder, and he pulled his police hat on and shoved mirrored shades in front of his eyes. In his blue uniform he looked exactly like a cop, and not at all like an old friend of my father and Uncle Bones. I couldn't get that photo out of my mind. So weird, all of them together, back during the war.

Mom gave me a little push in the back. "Say 'Good evening' to Sergeant Bouvier, son." I did, and he shook my hand quickly, then half-ran for the front door. I trotted off down the hall, and opened my own door. It smelled terrible in my room, and not just from my socks and dirty underpants on the floor. I opened my closet door, and looked up at Uncle Bones. He waved his bony hand at me, making shushing noises. In a shadow of his usual whispery voice, so soft I could hardly hear him, he said, "Not a word, Jimmy. I'll explain in a moment. Is he gone?"

"Just left," I whispered back, and my throat felt tight and painful. I started coughing and my eyes watered. It was scary, standing there looking at this rev hiding in my closet, even if it was just old Uncle Bones. Man, the *cops* were after him! "What have you—?"

"Shh! Shh!" Bones waved his hands frantically in front of his mouth. The skin was peeling off, as usual. His face was screwed up as if he was in terrible pain, but I knew that wasn't it, because revs can't feel pain. That's what they'd told us at school, anyway.

"I have to go out and help Mom with dinner," I said. "Please don't run away 'til I get back."

"I have things to do," Bones said, not promising anything. "Not a word, you hear?"

"Okay," I said, doubtfully.

"Everything will work out fine." Bones paused, and then gave me a mischievous, surprising grin. "Scout's honor."

Elaine took off her apron and poked at her hair a bit.

"I'm going out to look for Bonaparte, Jimmy. I don't know what the poor man has got himself caught up in now." She kicked off her green plastic sandals and pulled on a pair of socks and walking shoes. "I can't imagine what Will—what the Sergeant could have said to upset him so badly." She leaned across and kissed me on the forehead, and went to the front door. "Keep an eye on the house, sweetie, all right?"

"Okay, Mom. I'll do my homework." I'd already told her I'd finished it, but she didn't seem to notice.

"You're a good boy, Jimmy," she said, and turned around to give me an extra quick hug. "I'll be back in one shake of a lamb's tail."

The moment she was gone, I shot into my room and threw open the closet door. My heart sank. The smell was faded. Uncle Bones was gone. I felt a little sick at my stomach. I had a quick look at the carport. He hadn't driven off in Elaine's car, but probably wasn't just roaming around, because most people resent revs walking freely in the street. You see them sniffing angrily as the Stinkies pass. Sometimes they even shove them into the gutter. Bones had to be in some safe place that nobody ever went. "Scout's honor," he said. Oh.

I jumped up with a shout, put my fist in front of my mouth, shook my head and grinned. Nobody was in the house to hear me. I wanted to run out, but I'd promised Mom I'd stay in the house until she got back. I hopped from foot to foot, grinding my teeth and clenching my fists. "She won't mind," I muttered. Yes, she *would* mind. She'd be majorly pissed if we *both* disappeared, Bones and me. I was getting dizzy with excitement. The toilet window was still wide open where Bones had pretended to escape before he snuck back and hid in my closet before he *really* escaped. Scraps of scaly white skin were stuck to the frame where dead stuff had scraped off his hands. I pulled the window shut, smelling the faint odor of decay.

Sergeant Bouvier thought it was better than being really dead and buried, like my dad. What was the point of being a hero when you were dead and buried? I sent Dodger an Instant Message. He was probably the only person who'd understand, because of his sister. No response.

d00d, unu? cops r chasing bones

He came on the look, holding his iBerry. He was on a basketball court behind his private school, sweat running down his face. Dodger's father had been a three-point shooter for the San Antonio Spurs, back in the day before he blew out his right shoulder.

"Can't talk now, buddy. Hoops practice. Catch ya later." He clicked off.

It felt like there was *nothing* I could do. I was going nuts.

"How's the homework going, Jimmy?" Elaine was in the hallway, headed my way. I switched back to the *Discovery* flying through deep space. My heart was pounding like it was ready to explode.

"Done. Going out now, Mom." I tried to sound bored. "Me and Dodger want to go down to the mall and watch the new bot fighters."

Elaine stood in my doorway, looking worried. "All right, son. Keep out of trouble, and be home by six-thirty for dinner. And no junk food!"

"Okay. Love ya, Mom!" I dashed out the back way before she could change her mind, and headed along the alley in the direction of the old closed-down building used by the Scouts when Bones was a kid, right next to the McAllister Freeway where it crossed Highway 135.

2.

I wasn't supposed to go into this rundown neighborhood by myself. Elaine would shit a pig if she knew. Weeds grew all around the dilapidated old place. A few gaps in the cyclone fence showed where homeless people must have crawled through to get some shelter for the night. I tripped on an empty bottle in the long grass. The front door had been locked ever since the place was shut down, so I didn't even try it, and the downstairs windows were covered with corrugated steel sheeting firmly nailed into place, but I went around to the far side, where the shadowed ground stretched under the enormous expanse of the concrete freeway. Up there, cars were streaming home from work,

driving fast, thudding high above me. You could see in the shadows where someone had been burning old scraps of wood in a fire, either for warmth or to cook their dinner.

It hadn't always been this bad. According to Elaine, when the freeway was built it had cut our part of San Antonio in half. People started drifting away, and the houses were left unrepaired. Our own place was nearly at the edge of the bad neighborhood, easy walking distance, I hadn't needed my bike. A few years ago, Uncle Bones had walked past here with me and Mom, revisiting their childhood memories. It used to be a school gymnasium, then it was used for scout meetings. They'd closed it before I was born. I used to walk down here sometimes and think about my mother and Uncle Bones when they were young and my dad was still alive. But I'd never tried to get inside.

One of the thin sheets of rotting plywood that covered the back door had been partly kicked in. I crouched down, whispered through the opening: "Bones? You there?"

Nothing. I heard a train in the distance, hooting each time it approached a crossing. Something scurried inside the old building. Might have been a mouse, or a feral cat, or Bones trying to hide. It was impossible to see anything from where I was. Late afternoon summer light was still bright, but all the windows were blocked up and the inside was dark. I pushed the decaying plywood aside and crawled in.

I smelled him before I saw him.

The room was musty—mice had been leaving their droppings on the floor—but you couldn't miss the stink of a Stinky.

More loudly, staying just inside the half-opening, I said, "Uncle Bones, I know you're here."

A flashlight came on, dazzling me. I raised my arm in front of my eyes, squinting. A dark figure held the flashlight, standing near the rotten staircase in front of the closed main door.

"You shouldn't be here, Jimmy," a whispery voice said. The light moved away from my eyes. I blinked, seeing two red spots. "You've got to go."

"Well, you've caused all kinds of trouble, Bones," I said accusingly. "Mom is worried, and Sergeant Bouvier—"

"That busybody!" Bones switched off the flashlight and we stood in the smelly darkness. "He's had years. Outstanding time to pay a social call." His laugh sounded like a bark. "Bill Bouvier and I used to be friends, Jim. And your father. Thick as thieves, we were."

"Thieves!" I blurted it out. "Is that why you've been *associating with felons*?"

After a strange silence, Bones burst out laughing, or coughing, it was hard to tell the difference. He sounded like he was coughing up a lung. Maybe he was.

"*Associating with felons*? Jimmy boy, who have you been talking to now?"

"Bill Boof—Bill Bouvier. He said that to me today. Maybe he heard something from his dad."

He coughed some more. "Those boys have been completely out of control since their mother died, everyone says so."

"Bones," I started, then stopped. He didn't say anything. "Bones, why did you run away from the Sergeant?"

"No, the real question, Jim, is what to do with you." Bones groaned. "You can't stay here, you'll be in danger. But if you go straight home, I suppose you'll tell Elaine and she'll call William Bouvier back and everything will be ruined. Months of hard work. Look, I'll give you some money and you can catch an IMAX for a couple of hours."

"Mom—"

"I'll call your mother so she won't be worried." The light fell briefly on his other hand, holding his cell at the ready.

That was just nuts. Go to the *movies*? But he was right—if I couldn't talk him into

coming back home with me, I'd have to tell Elaine where he was hiding. I felt sick with fright again, this was so terrible. My mind raced round and round like the reflector on a bike wheel.

"Hey!" I yelled out aloud.

"Shoosh, silly puppy. We don't want to attract attention."

"You're trying to *trap* them."

Bones said nothing, and then, "Scammers." I thought I could see him grinning at me like a skull. "We'll stop *stinking*," Bones said bitterly. "We won't *rot* with our skin *falling off* us. Our hearts'll start *beating* again. So we can be ordinary people and not get spat at in the street."

In a faint voice, I said, "But it *is* a scam, isn't it? They can't really do any of that, can they?"

"No, they can't, Jim. They are maggots and grave-robbers, but this time their victims are still alive. Almost alive."

Stuff still didn't fit. My eyes stung in the dark. "Sergeant Bouvier wanted to know if you'd been hanging around with any strange people."

"I'm a sort of cop, too, James. I was in the army with your dad—"

"And with Sergeant Bouvier," I said, thinking of the photograph.

"William Bouvier was older than us, but yeah, we were friends back then. Before your dad and I got killed." He fell silent, and I could tell he was looking down at the dark floor, seeing nothing, remembering those days. "And the medics pulled me back, but not Johnny." He sighed. "Ah well, what's done can't be undone. Not all of it, anyway. Yeah, we were in the army. I still am, undercover. I'm a military policeman, Jim. I've been hunting down these maggots for years."

He looked at his watch again. "I have a meet set up here in half an hour. That's really as much as I can tell you, and now it's time for you to get out of here and go straight—"

I heard a loud crash and my eyes were dazzled. It was like the sound the Sergeant made kicking in the lock of the bathroom. This time it was the front door of the old decaying hall. Dark figures burst in through the brighter rectangle of the door, wide open now but already swinging closed again: two men, three. They must have been blinded by the darkness inside; Bones grabbed me, shoved me behind him.

"That was unnecessary, gentlemen," he said in his voice like paper rustling in a breeze. "The door was unlocked. I used to be a Scoutmaster here. Now what is all this nonsense? We have an arrangement. You're early, that's not polite. Are you ready to unload the stuff?"

Stuff? I thought.

"I don't trust you, Jones," one of the men said in an unpleasant, sneering tone. I started crawling away along the wall to the hardboard gap where I'd snuck in. "Yeah, we've got the goods, you'd better have the transfer keyed in."

Light slashed the man's face. The beam of light twisted in the air. Bones' long, heavy flashlight hit the skull in the forehead, and he yelled. I saw a flash of light from overhead, heard a loud cracking, then another. Twilight poured into the room from above. Two men in black uniforms dropped on ropes from manholes in the ceiling, followed by another pair. They held tangle-guns, and started firing streams of yellowy-green sticky gloop the moment their feet hit the floor. Men's voices shouted and cursed. The scammers were on the floor now, tangled up in green, luminous spaghetti. One of the morons pulled something heavy from his coat and threw it into the air. Nothing radioactive, it turned out, thank god. But you could *see* the shaped shock of concussion go upward into the dust, and I felt the bang.

The rotten old top floor, weakened by years of rain leaking through the roof, gave up the ghost.

* * *

Dust slammed up and then down, poured into the golden shafts of afternoon light from overhead, followed by splintering floorboards. We jumped wildly away from crashing timber, arms over our heads, grit in our blinking eyes, ears ringing. The skulls struggled against their green restraining loops. A military cop in black was smashed by a falling timber. Bones leaped in a sort of cottonwool silence through the ruins to help him, and a huge cross-beam came straight down like a bomb from above and slammed into his back. Uncle Bones crashed to the floor, jerked in the dimness, lay still. Two of his men ran to him, shoved the heavy beam aside, picked him up carefully and started carrying him outside into the daylight. He looked very, very dead.

More than anything, I wanted to howl with fear and fury. I made a wet snuffly noise I could scarcely hear, even from the inside, and something enormous slammed into me, too, along the side of my head.

People asked me afterward if it was like getting kicked by a horse. Maybe, I've never seen a real live horse. Maybe getting kicked by a horse is like being whacked in the head by a huge falling piece of two-by-ten timber. I went down in the dust and felt everything going away.

The last thing I saw before I was killed seemed impossible, Sergeant William Bouver, his mouth shouting angrily, his roaring loud voice switched off, lights shining at the doorway, very bright lights, and more people than you'd think could fit into the old hall came pushing into the place, bringing the lights in, yelling silent warnings, probably screaming at the tops of their voices, and then I was gone.

Which is not so surprising because the top of my skull had been torn off and I was bleeding to death.

I woke up slowly, tired, like I'd spent all of yesterday swimming and shooting hoops but now had to get up at five in the morning to go fishing. I stretched, yawned, and tried to open my eyes.

My eyelids seemed to be stuck together. And the sheets felt odd. Not like my bed sheets at all, stiff, and they smelled overpowering, like disinfectant. Like a deodorant. As if the scent was trying to cover something up.

Oh, shit.

Everything came rushing back. The dark smelly collapsing building, Bones slammed by falling wreckage, me too. And now I couldn't see. Maybe my eyes were gone, eaten away, empty sockets, like a dead possum I once found in the street. I put my fingers up to my eyes. A bandage was wrapped tightly over the top of my head.

But nothing hurt. If anything, I felt . . . *numb*. I was exhausted, and starving hungry, but feeling no pain. That was the amazing part.

"Something hit me," I said aloud. My tongue was thick, and my lips were numb. "*Coulda killed me.*"

I struggled against the tight sheets and blanket, tried to get my legs over the edge of the bed. I seemed to be tied down somehow. First I couldn't see, now I was trapped. And under the revoltingly sweet chemical flower smell of the deodorant, there was something even more revolting—

"Hey!" I shouted loudly. "Hey, what's going on?"

Feet came running on clickety-clack tiles, and soft hands seemed to grasp mine, although I wasn't sure. A sweetly perfumed cheek was pressed to my face. Mom! I'd know her anywhere, even without my eyes. She was sobbing, I could hear it and feel it, her body shook against me, and that made me cry too. I started to shake really hard and couldn't stop. I sniffed at her perfume, and then, still shaking and shuddering with fright, I lifted one hand up to my nose and sniffed at it.

My breath came back at me. It stank faintly of rotting meat.

I screamed like a girl, lifted my other hand, cupped them and had a really deep huff, sniffing hard.

The stench of death. I started crying harder.

"They've turned me into a Stinky Dead Meat," I blurted, between sobs. They'd stuck those shitty enbots in me. I'd stink so bad nobody would want to be anywhere near me. I sobbed some more. Not even Dodger. The Boofhead brothers would beat the crap out of me every day.

My own odor cut through Mom's perfume. I tried to wave it away, and the same foul odor still clung in my nostrils. It was coming from deep inside me.

"Don't worry about any of that. You're all right now, sweetie," Mom said softly in my ear, but her voice broke. She kept crying softly. "Really you are. There's nothing to be worried about."

"Mom!" Suddenly I stopped feeling sorry for *myself*. "What happened to Uncle Bones?" I was ashamed. "His back was broken, Mom, I saw it happen. Is he dead?" I stopped, confused. "I mean, I know he's dead, but is he *really truly* dead now? Did Uncle Bonaparte get killed again?"

"Not a chance, buddy," said a whispery voice I recognized. "Alive again, alive and kicking, shaking a leg."

My mouth fell open. "Bones?" I stared around and couldn't see anything, of course, because of the bandages over my eyes. But there was nothing wrong with my nose. With a rather rude loud sniff, I tested the air. *Sniff, sniff.*

A stronger stench of Stinky. From me, and now, even riper, from Uncle Bones as well. My starving stomach clenched, and I started to wail again, sick with horror.

"Hey, it's not so bad. They fixed us up, young fellow," Bones said cheerfully. "Me for a second time." He sounded amused.

"So I really *was* dead?" It's one thing to suspect something like that, it's another to hear that you were right. I shivered, still feeling sick. But part of me, I think, was strangely proud. Hey, pretty cool, really. How many other kids had died and been brought back? Ashanti was the only one I knew of, and I'd only ever spoken to her on the phone a couple of times, calling Dodger's house. They'd stopped doing the treatment when it was obvious it had gone wrong, and she was just a kid when she died, back around 2012. I was confused. If the doctors weren't doing revivals any longer, how come I was now a Stinky? Something must have changed.

"Where am I?" I knew I wasn't at home. A hospital? Jail?

"We're having a little stay at Fort Sam Houston." Okay, Fort Sam was the big military base with a huge medical center, I'd seen it from the car. They had a helicopter landing pad right next to the freeway. Not the nicest part of the city. "Brooke General Hospital," Bones added, and you'd swear there was a note of pride in his voice. "We were lucky, kiddo. Biggest military medical training facility in the world. And right now, the most important."

Made sense—if Bones was still a soldier, still with the Army, they had to look after him. And their military doctors were the ones who'd done most of the old revivals, according to Mrs. Bartle. She said thousands of recently dead service people had been flown back from the Terrorism War, full of temporary enmachines. It still didn't explain why the Army had made *me* into a Stinky as well.

"Am I stuck here? In the hospital?" I tried to imagine what it'd be like to stay here for days, maybe for weeks. Grim. Elaine and Dodger and Bones would visit, for sure, but I just wanted to go home. I wanted to go into my own room and shut the door marked GENIUS AT WERK, and play *Yeah-No* on my old look.

"Just for a bit," Elaine said. "Can you deal with that, darling boy?"

"Yeah no," I said.

I was in luck, really, when you thought about it. Even if I did smell like dead rotting meat and nobody would talk to me when I got out. Shit kind of luck, but worse had happened to plenty of others. My Dad. Sergeant Bouvier's wife.

A trolley was being rolled in, with at least one squeaky wheel. A grumpy man's voice said, "You all have to leave except the boy's mother. It's time for the bandages to come off, and I don't want a circus in my hospital ward. I'm tired of people getting underfoot and in my hair."

Bones leaned down and whispered in my ear, breathing out stink, "*He hasn't got any hair, that's why he's so pissed.*"

I laughed, and that surprised me. "Hey, I'm *starving*. Did I miss out on dinner?"

"Left foot forward, young Mr. Stokes," said nurse Florez. She held my arm while I reached with numb fingers to grab on to the parallel rails at waist height. When she let go, I lurched forward like Frankenstein's monster, reaching for the rails and getting my feet tangled together. At least I wasn't wearing hospital pajamas any more, and I could see. The enbots had healed my broken head, but broken everything else inside me, broken it and fixed it, and broken it again and fixed it again, and again, and again. No wonder I was dizzy all the time. They had let me put on a tracksuit and slippers for my morning exercise session. Felt like walking through thick mud. Being a rev makes you clumsy, as well as hungry all the time. I started to topple forward onto my face, but nurse Florez was there to catch me, as wide across as she was tall, which did not make her very tall but certainly very wide. Big muscles under a padding of comforting fat. I liked her, and it embarrassed me to be so clumsy.

"Can I have a rest soon?"

"Shame on you, Mr. Stokes." The nurse wagged one finger in the air in front of my nose. I wasn't wearing a mask, but she didn't avert her own nose. Nice of her. "We are going all the way to the end of the rails—and back." She grinned and three of her chins tucked themselves together. "Then we'll see about a snack. I'm feeling a little peckish myself."

That went on for a whole week, while I tried to keep up with schoolwork, downloading from the net. It wasn't as dull as being in class, but it sure wasn't as good as having a holiday. Sometimes, when no one was around, I pulled the sheets up over my head and cried for a couple of minutes. Call me a sissy, but you'd cry too, if you suddenly turned into a rev zombie. And there were worse things. I now knew exactly why all the Stinky spam screamed about getting it up. Being a rev killed the juice. I tried jerking off a couple of times in the bathroom, with the door locked, and just couldn't. It was humiliating.

Elaine usually didn't get away from work until late in the afternoon, but Bones came every day to see me. "You'll soon get the hang of it, Jim," he assured me. "It's just a matter of retraining. Our bodies aren't working the way they used to. Here, I want you to check out this site when you have a chance. It'll help you understand what's going on with you."

Instead of shooting it straight to my look, he handed me a card with an url. I put it on the gray metal cabinet next to the bed. All I wanted was to get out and go for a walk. Brooke Hospital was okay—for a hospital. Not the fun place. Bones sat quietly next to me. I looked at his hand resting on the arm of his chair like a claw. Grayish skin. Yellow nails. Mine weren't that bad; but then I hadn't been dead long. I didn't want to stare, but I found myself examining his face. Now that I had the use of my eyes back, I kept *gazing* at things. You don't really *see* people you know well, only what you expect. Now that I looked carefully, it was obvious why they called people like us zombies. The skin on his face was tight against the bones, dull and flaking,

the way your skin peels off after bad sunburn. Bones' face did not have the bright healthy glow of sunburn. His eyes were sunk into their sockets. I knew I was starting to look nearly as bad, there were mirrors in the bathroom.

I blurted out, "They should have just left me there." Buried me beside Dad.

"Bleeding to death?" Bones said. He shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Aren't you ever sorry they saved *your* life?"

"Eh? Of course not, boy."

"Well, don't you blame the doctors for what they've done to you?"

"Jim, you have your whole life. Me, I still have quite a lot of mine."

I hung my head. Not looking at him, I said, "Yeah no, but I'm never going to have a girlfriend now. The kids at school will hate me." I meant *pick on me, treat me like shit*, but I didn't want to sound like a wimp. I took a deep breath, and my own odor almost made me gag. "And I *stink*!"

"Better than the alternative, old son. Believe me. Far better than the alternative."

I wondered how Dad would feel, if he could see me now.

I kept nagging, and eventually nurse Florez and the doctors decided I was well enough to take a walk outside. Sorry, I don't mean "well enough"—I wasn't sick, exactly, more like a racehorse that overnight has been changed by an evil magician into a dung beetle. You have to learn the simplest things all over again. They let me wear my proper bagged clothes, and a pair of sneakers, but insisted that I carry an electronic walking stick, like an old man. Okay, anything to get out of that room. Dodger came over for the big event, on Saturday morning, and to my surprise his father and mother came visiting as well.

"Hey, dude." He slapped my hand. I was starting to get back some sensation in my skin, and it felt good. I grinned at him, then held out my hand to the 'rents.

"Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Washington. Thanks for driving Dodger over."

"We were bringing Ashanti in," Mr. Washington told me, "for her, uh, check-up." It was still hard for me to believe that my pal's father was the great Ty Washington, formerly of the Spurs. "Elijah nagged us until we included him as well." I swear, it took a moment to realize they were talking about Dodger.

"Do, do you think I could see Ashanti?" I really needed to talk to another . . . *revitalized person* . . . closer to my own age.

"My daughter is very shy," Mr. Washington said, and frowned. "I don't believe—"

"You're looking quite fine, Jim," Mrs. Washington said quickly, changing the subject. *Looking fine?* I blinked, but she wasn't mocking me, she really meant it. Well, she'd had years to get used to the idea, looking after Ashanti. "Why don't we take that little stroll outside while Ashie is seeing her doctor? Got your rebreather?"

"I don't wear a mask," I said. I found my stick and led them back to the elevator. The air felt hot and sticky after the cool air conditioning of the hospital. There was a lawn of thick green grass in front of the parking lot, but it seemed safer to stay on the sidewalk. I held my hand up to shade my eyes, and saw a drift of fine particles falling in the sunlight. My skin, flaking off.

Fairly soon I had to hustle back inside to take a dump. Also embarrassing, but that's one of the problems with being dead. You can't digest your food properly.

"Elijah can visit with you a little longer, Jim," Ty Washington told me. "We'll come back in an hour." I glanced at Dodger quickly to see if he was rolling his eyes, wanting to be airvac'd out, but he really didn't seem to mind. The moment the 'rents were out the door, he pulled the visitor's chair over beside me and grabbed my look.

"Hey, Ashanti wanted me to tell you about a site she thinks you should hit. I bet you've been avoiding this stuff like the plague." He gave a laugh like a dog barking and nudged me in the ribs. "Like the plague, get it?"

"Very funny. There's nothing wrong with me, except that I'm dead."

"Yeah no, obviously you're not *really*. Here, have a look at this."

He had clicked on a site with all kinds of gruesome medical pictures of dying people getting fixed up with the nanomed revival bots Bones and I had been injected with. I thought the site looked vaguely familiar, and grabbed the card Bones had left with me.

Right. I'd started looking at this days ago, and just felt sick at the sight of it. Now that Dodger and I were viewing it together, this stuff looked much more interesting. Maybe I was just getting used to being a rev. I clicked on a program about being a Stinky, and fast-forwarded to some stuff about how it worked. "These repair units are only a few thousandths of a millionth of a meter in size," a pretty young scientist was saying to the camera. She was dressed like an *Earth Idol* star. Blah blah. Those things were crawling around inside me and Uncle Bones and Dodger's sister. Inside our cells. It made me shiver, and I felt my stomach tighten up.

A man with white hair and a white lab coat took over. "So what about those experiments, now forbidden by Congress, to revive the recently dead?" A very respectful image of a corpse appeared, but you couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman.

The graphic peeled open the skin, as if the camera was going down into the red and purple and white insides of the dead person.

"Yikes," Dodger said. "That's what they did to you and Ash, nerdhead."

"When any creature dies, including a human being, the cells start to break down," the man told me. "Oxygen no longer feeds the brain and other tissues." More blah blah. I skipped forward. A needle was suddenly shooting enbots into a dead person. Okay, they had to replace all the blood with these machines floating in some sort of pale blue gloop. Why Uncle Bones had no heartbeat, and felt cold if you leaned against him. I shivered. Me too, now. My hand reached up and touched my chest. No *thump-thump*. I watched the nanos on the monitor spread out through the corpse, like an open carton of milk poured into a bucket of water.

The little machines started spreading into the stiff, cold body. They found broken cells and started fixing them, kind of sewed them up, although everything soon kept falling apart again and they had to keep fixing it. Like doing your 'work. You get it done, and hand it in, and the next day there's a whole other batch to do. It just never stops.

"This is a very simplified picture of what really happens, of course," said the young pop star, who now wore a white lab coat herself, looking very serious. "Early experiments were encouraging. People who had been given up for dead returned to life. Problem was, the nano-repair method turned out to have many drawbacks and side effects, which is why such treatments have been banned for the last seven years."

Side effects again. I watched in misery as the man and woman took it in turns to explain why the little machines could only do limited repairs, so they had to keep fixing up the cells as fast as the cells tried to fall apart and die again.

Now wearing a black gown and holding a judge's gavel, the man told us: "Meanwhile, criminals prey upon the thousands of victims of those failed experiments."

A couple of Stinkies huddling away from the taunts of people in the street. Someone driving by flung an empty bottle at them. Crash of smashing glass, and bright splinters stung them. The rev lady started to cry. "Revitalized people are often shunned by heartless and frightened members of our communities. Sometimes they are called the Living Dead, Zombies, or worse names. They cling to a single hopeless dream: to recover their full health and life some day. Leading scientists agree that this is still impossible, yet greedy criminals continue to extort millions of dollars by selling—"

I thumbed the vid off. "Right. That's what Bones was trying to stop." I felt pretty good, saying that. Even though I wished I'd never set foot in the old Scout building.

My homeroom at the Astronaut Michael Collins High is right up against big air-conditioning fans, so there are no windows. The only light comes from bright white LED strips on the ceiling. You can hear the fans thudding away on the other side of the brick wall. I like it, it covers up all the hooting and shoving in the back of the room. That day a lot of it was aimed at me—my first day back at school and nobody wanted to sit next to me. I felt like the last man on Earth.

There was a knock on the door, and the principal walked straight in. She was wearing her official fake-fur Davy Crockett coonskin hat, with a Go Spurs T-shirt under her jacket. I thought the coonskin hat looked dumb, but Mrs. Sanchez said it was to get us into the right spirit for the one hundred and ninetieth anniversary of the Battle of the Alamo, even though that wasn't due for another year. She nodded to Mr. Blakeley, bent over his look getting our schedules straightened out.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen." She insisted on that, maybe because that fuckwit Sam Boofhead was nearly seventeen—he'd had to repeat a year. Because of his mom's death, he was so upset. Yeah, right.

"Buenos dias, Mrs. Sanchez," most of us droned, although a few called out, "Yo."

She was smiling directly at me with big shiny teeth, and I tried to sink with my heart down into the seat.

"Come up here to the front for a moment, Mr. Stokes."

Feet shuffled in embarrassment, and I don't just mean mine. Whispering broke out as I lurched to my feet. Someone hissed, "Mr. *Stinky*, you mean." Boofhead.

Mrs. Sanchez stood even straighter, and looked at the back of the room with graser eyes. "None of that in this room, Mr. Bouvier, and none in this school." I shambled to the front, and she placed one hand firmly on my shoulder. "This school is proudly named for the great command pilot of Apollo 11, the first spacecraft to land men on the Moon! Although Astronaut Collins never set foot on the Moon, his role was just as important as the two who landed there."

We'd heard this a thousand times. Man, if I went all the way to the Moon, I'd want to *land* there, not just stay stuck up in the sky going round and round until the other guys dawdled back. I didn't have time to think about that. Mrs. Sanchez was telling the class about my unfortunate series of events, and how glad she was that I had returned to the school *from the very jaws of death*, and how it was a testament to my bravery that I was here now, and how *nobody* in the school was going to give me a hard time, and if anyone did it would be *over her dead body*.

There was a snigger at that. I looked up at her myself, sideways, and Mrs. Sanchez closed her mouth, frowned, glanced at me, and went faintly red for a moment.

"You know what I mean, class. This young man has been through a lot. I want you all to give him every consideration. Thank you. Go back to your seat, Jim. The class is yours, Mr. Blakeley."

I trudged back, humiliated, and sank into my chair. Julia Hernandez had taken the chance to move away to a spare desk, and someone up the back muttered, "Did someone cut the *cheese*?" Some other wit muttered back, "Nah, someone brought their *dead cat* to class." Stifled laughs. "You'd think he could wear a *mask*." That was Bones's fault, he said it amounted to giving in to prejudice. "A *bag* over his head!" More sniggering. I gritted my teeth and clicked on my look, wishing I'd stayed in Brooke Hospital.

The rest of the day was pretty much like that. I ate by myself in the cafeteria, and everyone else stayed well away, so there was a wide hoop of empty tables around me and the other kids were crammed up together, laughing and eating and drinking

while I tried to choke down my lunch. I was still horribly hungry all the time. The enbots used up a lot of raw material, constantly rebuilding my flaking cells, and it had to come from somewhere. I'd even been given special permission to snack in class if I had to, and I'd gobbled down a couple of apples and a cold pizza during our history lesson on the Nat Turner rebellion. Trouble was, food tasted terrible these days. No, not terrible—just *blah*. Like chewing and swallowing polystyrene packing peanuts. By the end of the day I was angry and tired. The last thing I wanted was a message from Mrs. Sanchez's secretary, but it flashed up on my look:

Mr. Stokes, a visitor will be waiting at the entrance on North Main to take you home.
for: Principal Sanchez.

Elaine? Maybe she'd taken off early from work. I stumped along with happiness in my heart. The uniformed guard was checking everyone out of the building, watching his detector displays as usual. I looked around. No Mom. No Bones, either. My good mood hissed out like air from a punctured balloon.

"Jim?"

I smelled something faintly unpleasant, turned. A terribly thin young woman stood against the wall, under a display of the Spurs, in a lavender mask. Not a cheerleader, that's for sure. Her dark face looked a little gray, eyes sunken, cheekbones sharp above the rebreather. She didn't look sick, exactly—just . . . *frail*. A purple scarf hid her hair. She was smiling shyly at me. I'd seen her picture, of course, Dodger had posted a bunch. Taken before her death, and after.

"Ashanti?" I said.

She nodded, and held out her hand. "Rough day, Jim? Come on, I'll give you a lift home." Her voice was quite clear, you wouldn't have guessed she had a mask blocking her mouth.

"Uh, sorry, there's someone picking me—" Oh. I shook my head. "That'd be you."

"Right. Come on, I left my car out in the street, I don't want to get a ticket."

Suddenly my misery was gone. I'd been curious to know more about Ashanti Washington ever since the day I met Dodger, which only happened because Uncle Bones introduced us at Cubs. Turned out he knew Dodger's dad somehow, which was pretty impressive. "My sister's like your uncle," Dodger told me. "She's what they call a 'Stinky' too." The next year I stopped going to Cubs, and never joined the Scouts even though Dodge did. Maybe that was because he went to a private junior high that Elaine couldn't afford, up in Alamo Heights. St. Rufus's is almost a military academy, major emphasis on sports, and they had their own Scout troop. We stayed friends, but somehow I'd never been invited to his house. I'd figured it was because Ash didn't like to see people. Live people, that is.

"Listen, would your mom mind if I took you somewhere else before I drop you off? Here, you can call her." She held out her cell.

"They have a cell jammer where she works, just like school. It'll be okay. Can I drive?"

"You have a license, of course." It was obvious that I didn't.

"Spoilsport. Where to?"

"Hop in, I'll show you."

We drove in her last-year's Prius past the huge Community University, and along busy San Pedro toward downtown. The freeway loomed up. We went under it, and in a few minutes we were passing the Alamo. Stores across Alamo Plaza were doing brisk business in mementos and snacks. Ash swung into a disabled parking slot—"Hey, if dead people aren't disabled, who is?"—and I was relieved to see that she had

the right pinger on her window. We crossed the grass, through the throng of visitors in brand-new Alamo T-shirts and ten-gallon hats. Little kids dashed around wailing or laughing, parents tried to keep them in line. Lots of elderly retired folks, too, here for a glimpse of history.

"Makes you proud, doesn't it?" Ashanti said, pausing before the open doors of the sunlit stone Mission building.

I shrugged. "Sure," I said. "But my folks aren't really Texans, my mom and dad came from up north. Dad was stationed here at Lackland when he flew out to—"

She touched my arm. "Yes. I know." Like an older sister (not *that* much older), she took my hand and drew me away toward Crockett Street. "Let's go for a stroll along the Riverwalk. I haven't been there since I was a little girl."

"Okay." Her hand was trembling. Ashanti was scared. I looked around. Just tourists and locals, wandering this way and that. One or two of them cast us dirty looks as we passed, covered their noses in a rude way, coughed, looked at each other. I remembered the vid of smashing glass and jeering people. "Uh, Ashanti," I said, "is this really such a great idea?"

"I think so," she said. Her voice shook a little. "I've been putting it off way too long, Jim. It's why I brought you here. I don't want you to fall into the same trap."

We stopped at an intersection to wait for the walk signal. The afternoon sun was warm on my back, and our shadows stretched out ahead of us. You could smell pizza and barbecue and beer. Soon the eateries would be opening for early dinner. I was hungry again, but the odors didn't do much for my appetite. I couldn't help but notice our stinky sweat, like a cloud of death that moved along with us. A little boy stared up at us and said, "Ooooh, they smell *awful*, Mommy." His mother looked embarrassed and his father shushed him, but they drew away from us. As the light went green, the family turned sharply around the corner. I was pretty sure they'd been about to cross with us.

"Nothing's changed. Sorry, this is how it is, Jim," Ashanti told me. I felt bad, because most of the smell probably came from me, crap given off by what Mrs. Bartle had called "anaerobic bacterial decay" or something. In other words, my rotting guts. I decided on the spot to make Elaine buy me a mask, whatever Bones thought of the idea. We went down the steps to the Riverwalk, the long, pretty pedestrian path running on both sides of the San Antonio River through the heart of the city. Large hotels rose up on both sides, and an open boat ploughed through the rather dirty water, two guitar players, passengers being served way early dinner. A guide spoke loudly in Spanish. Big crowds hadn't yet started to surge back and forth on the Riverwalk, but people strolled along, some walking dogs. A nasty-looking creature on a short leash, wire mask over its muzzle, growled at me, and lunged before its owner jerked sharply on the lead. No apologies, just a furious look at us. The man muttered something as he passed. Like doggie, like master.

"Oh dear. This really was a bad idea, Jim." Ashanti looked awful. She stumbled toward a metal seat, dropped down on it. "I'm sorry, I thought I could do this. I wanted you to know that it's not necessary to . . ." She trailed off, closed her eyes. Sitting like that, not breathing, she really did look like a corpse left out in the sun. ". . . To hide away. For us Stinkies." Tears started leaking from her closed eyes, rolled down her sunken cheeks and over the seal of her mask.

"Come on," I said, "we should get out of here." People looked at us as they passed, but nobody offered to help, or get her a glass of water like they do in the movies.

I pulled Ashanti to her feet, and wondered if I should use her cell phone to call 911. Or maybe her mom or dad. She got up, but as she took a step she stumbled, bumped into a red-faced beefy man twice as big as her, laughing like a hyena with his thuggy

pals. I wondered what people like that were doing on the Riverwalk. Picking pock-ets, maybe? The man jerked around as she bumped him.

"Hey, watch it, bitch!" He shoved back, and poor Ashanti went sprawling. He looked down at her. I got a whiff of his beery breath. "Look, Duke, a couple of *Stinkies*. Wadda ya say we chuck 'em both in the water? See if they float."

"Come on, Shorty," said one of his friends, pulling at his arm. "You don't wanna do that."

"Shouldn't be allowed out in public," the red-faced man shouted. He didn't like being contradicted by his friend. I realized he probably wasn't much older than Ashanti, maybe one of the millions of people who had never had a job because computers did it better or it had been outsourced to Nigeria. Elaine said that's why I had to study hard, so I could get a decent job. Shorty grabbed Ashanti by the arm, clumsily swung her toward the edge of the Riverwalk, braying his laugh. Huge joke.

What he didn't realize was how fragile and tired revs get. Ashanti flew off her feet, hurtled into the murky water.

"You idiot, Shorty," one of his friends said. "Now see what—"

I looked about wildly. Nobody was doing anything—not Shorty, and not his loutish friends. On the far side of the river, two old ladies walking small dogs were staring in shock. One of them turned her head and started to scream. I followed her gaze, and saw that the cruise boat was coming back, churning through the water toward us.

Ashanti was sinking. She looked . . . well, *dead*. A moment later, I couldn't even see her in the murky water. Her purple scarf floated on the surface. I threw myself over the edge and into the water. Nasty gritty stuff went up my nose and into my mouth. I choked for a moment, tried to spit it back. But I was plunging into the darkness, and bubbles came out between my lips and into my eyes. I thrashed about, looking for Ash. There she was, tumbling slowly, like a dark starfish with four limbs. My chest started to squeeze tight in panic. But if I went up to the surface, I'd never find her again. I'd hit my head on the boat, or get caught in its propeller. I forced my mouth closed and swam on.

And suddenly my chest didn't hurt any more. I kicked hard toward Ashanti. My shoes felt heavy, and my uniform cargo pants dragged against the water, but I wasn't choking and I wasn't drowning.

Something hit my outstretched hand. Something cool, but warmer than the water. Ashanti's masked face. I forgot about breathing, grabbed her under the arms. A shadow was passing over us—the cruise boat. My foot hit the slushy bottom, and I churned my way through it. Ash began to struggle, and I saw the white wild flash of her eyes. She was terrified. I waved my spare hand in front of her eyes, and shook my head. Not drowning, waving.

The nano gloop was still breathing for us, of course.

When we breathed, the machines had taken oxygen from our lungs, and packed it away inside ridiculous little engines that swept themselves through our blood, which didn't need to be pushed along by our still hearts. I knew there was a limit to how long we could go without taking another breath, but it might be time enough to get us to the other side of the river.

It was awfully dark. Someone was singing a high note in my ears.

I kept going, half-carrying and half-pushing Ashanti. Thump! I'd run into the concrete wall of the Riverwalk. Now all we had to do was climb up.

Ashanti pulled loose from my arms. She was trying to get out by herself, but now she had one hand clutched in mine. Darker water was dragging me down again, into the murk. I was choking, finally. The air had run out. My arms and legs weren't working. I went away into a whirling—

"Well, young man, you must really like this place." Nurse Florez's cheerful voice.

"Huh?" I hurt all over and my head was muzzy.

"Please don't say 'Where am I?' They all do that. But since you ask, you're in the pediatric wing of Brooke Hospital, same place you were last time. But this time it was for drowning." She paused, gave a burbling laugh. "To start with."

Oh, right. Drowning.

"How's Ash?" I yelped. My throat really did hurt. Maybe they'd pushed a tube down to pump out all the repulsive river water I'd swallowed. My arms and legs hurt, too. Everything hurt. "Ashanti Washington," I added.

"She's just fine. You're a hero, dude."

Something was different, and I couldn't put my finger on it. I clutched at the sheets. They also felt different. Not different from home, different from last time. Huh? And something else—

I sniffed. Hospital odors, nothing rotting. I must be used to it by now, I thought gloomily. Used to my own stench.

"Sit up, now, Jimmy boy, you have some important people here to see you."

Elaine? No, two men stood in the doorway, one of them extremely tall, with a closely shaved dark head. I didn't recognize the other one.

"Mr. Washington." Then: "Bones? Is that you?" But of course it was.

Dodger's father stayed put at the door. "You first, Colonel."

My uncle grinned and stepped forward. Over his shoulder, as he took me firmly by the hand, he said, "Hey, we're not in uniform, Ty. Call me Bones."

"Can't do that, Colonel. Wouldn't be proper." Ty Washington stepped forward and stood beside Bones, towering over him. One day, I thought, Dodger will be that tall. "Thank you, James, from the bottom of my heart. To have lost her a second time, and just at the moment when—" He broke off, and I swear there were tears in his eyes. He glanced at Bones.

"No secret any longer, Captain Washington," Bones said. "Or it won't be, in a day or two. And it's not as if we can hide it from the kid anyway. Look at both of us, we're as healthy as prize stallions."

"That's 'Ty' and you know it . . . Bones," said Mr. Washington. He said to me: "He was my commanding officer in the desert. Before the poor fool got himself killed."

"And Ty was the one who dragged me out of the burning IBFV and got me to the medics." I knew an IBFV was an armored Improved Bradley Fighting Vehicle, but I'd never known Bones was a colonel.

"Of course, the colonel was only a captain himself, back in those days."

"Jim isn't interested in our old war stories," Bones said. Wrong! I wanted to know everything, about Bones, about my dad. But I was trying to put it all together. I looked down at my hands, and touched my face. The skin was clear, no horrid flaking. Things felt right again. We were *fixed*!

"Your mom will be here shortly. She's driving in with the sergeant." He sat on the edge of the bed. "There's a few details you'll need to hold back from your school friends for another day or two. Luckily, it's the weekend."

Huh? "How can it be? Today's—"

"Oh. You've been here eleven days, Jim. Getting the new treatment. So has Ashanti. And I have, too. As you can surely see." Bones was grinning fit to bust. He looked ten years younger, and ten times as alive.

A great heavy pair of shoes came clumping up the corridor. Sergeant Bouvier's tread. Mom came in with him, and ran over to kiss me. A moment later the policeman's large hand came down on my shoulder. I flinched, but his squeeze was gentle.

"Well, young fellow, you've given your mother an awful fright—for a second time. I'm relieved to see you among the living again." He stopped, and I imagined the frowning looks the adults were shooting at each other. "You're a smart boy, Jim," the

sergeant said. "Smarter than I was. Nobody bothered telling me this rogue Bonaparte was still in the same line of police work."

Me either, but hey. I sat up in the hard hospital bed. Mom moved a pillow behind my shoulders. "You figured I'd lead you to Uncle Bones," I said. "So you followed me, then called in your troops."

"Close enough," he said. "I've apologized to your family for my suspicions, Jim."

"You really thought Bones might be doing some . . . nasty deal . . . right?"

"Yep. If I couldn't stop him, at least I'd frighten him into running to his friends." He cleared his throat. "Bones was way ahead of me. He knew exactly what he was doing."

"Hey," Bones said. "Anyway, it went wrong. Without your crew, Bill, Jimmy here and my squad would've been in *big* trouble. Me especially."

I found myself grinning, and couldn't believe how good I felt, suddenly. Big trouble. We'd both got killed stone dead, but that wasn't enough trouble for Bones?

"I tell you, Jim," he said, "we both look a hell of a lot better."

"Without the stinks," I said in a small voice. "Gone for good?"

"Without *any* of the problems, darling," Elaine told me. She had both my hands in hers, and was rubbing them on her cheek. I felt a brief stupid burst of shame, thinking for an instant that she'd have to scrub her face clean to get the smell off of her. Then I remembered all over again that I wasn't a zombie now. "It was just a matter of time."

Mr. Washington said, "Once the doctors got it working in mice and gerbils—"

"Mice?"

"They had to make sure, Jim," Elaine said. She sounded awfully tired; I wondered how much sleep she'd had during the last two weeks. "We got special permission from a closed court so you could have the old embargoed nano treatment. Bonaparte explained to the judge that it was just a matter of weeks until the full cure was announced." She pressed the top of my head with her hand.

"So what about all those fool Stink—*victims* who paid the scammers for fake cures?"

"Not fools, Jim, just desperate people," Bones said. "They weren't prepared to wait for the science."

The sergeant grunted. "Always skulls abusing the hopes of disappointed people."

Yeah, okay, enough with the moralizing. "You want to trap as many as you can. Once people hear that—"

"They'll stop buying fake meds," my mom said angrily, "and the shitheads'll be off pulling some new scam on someone else."

I stared at her. Well, the shitheads *had* killed her son and her brother. So hey, she's entitled.

We heard a polite knock. Ashanti Washington, without a rebreather mask and wearing a bright green scarf, stood in the open doorway with her mother. Dodger was grinning like crazy behind them. Ash still looked drawn and undernourished, but her eyes were bright, and I guessed her awful rotting meat odor was gone. Like mine.

"Come in, come in," Elaine called, unabashed by her outburst. "The more the merrier!"

Nurse Florez put her head into the room. "You'll have to quiet down, please, you're annoying the other patients. The sick ones."

I grinned back at the Dodge and waved. Uncle Bones was leaning across to mutter something in Ashanti's ear. With a big grin, she came over to me and bent down, and I smelled a sweet fragrance. She whispered in my own ear, "Hey, Jim, my dog has no nose."

I looked at her in astonishment. Her eyes danced. Man, I was halfway in *love* with this girl!

"Yeah? How does he smell?"

"*Terrible!*" we both yelled together, and the nurse shook her head but you could tell she was pleased. Elaine started crying again because I *didn't* smell terrible, not any more, and neither did Ashie or Bones, and that was okay by me. ○

Roughs 'n' Ready

Frank Frazetta is eighty years old this year, and, despite his relative lack of public production due to age and medical issues (a number of strokes deprived him of the use of his right, or drawing, hand), he's possibly more popular than ever. After a long string of influential coffee-table books collecting his work, the 2003 documentary about his career, *Painting with Fire*, seemed to solidify his place in the artistic pantheon and reawaken viewers both veteran and newbie to the magnitude of his accomplishments. Image Comics now features a line of books inspired by Frazetta's work. Last year's film *The Pathfinder* was an avowed Frazetta homage. The Pennsylvania museum devoted to his art hosts a constant stream of visitors. And his originals continue to sell for big prices. An entire strain of written and visual heroic fantasy would not exist today—at least not in the form we know—without his pioneering and utterly distinctive imagery.

To further remind us of the hard work and instinctive skillful joy inherent in Frazetta's art, we now get a welcome nudge from Arnie and Cathy Fenner, the publishers at Spectrum Fantastic Art. They have compiled—and supplied informative text for—a new book titled *Rough Cuts* (hardcover, \$19.95, 127 pages, ISBN 978-1-59929-013-3), which presents tons of heretofore-unseen Frazetta goodies, in the form of "conceptual art, doodles, and sketchbook drawings." The book itself is sumptuous—padded vinyl covers, hefty paper stock, endpapers depicting a cool, virile, young Frazetta—but this presentation is trumped by the wonders within.

Here we find such gems as Frazetta's concepts for the cast of a Dracula film

that was never made. My favorite is one of Drac's tasty bad-girl vampettes, on pages 54-5. But seeing this relatively refined artwork is second-best to seeing the "roughs" for famous cover art. These initial inspirations for the finished images that are now canonical show in even greater proportion the same verve, sprightliness, and exuberance that animate the finished works. You can almost sense Frazetta deliberating attitudes of bodies and compositions of landscapes. The tentative colors applied to the roughs are subtle yet evocative. Characters are sometimes left faceless, but exude attitude and personality nonetheless. These roughs show more mastery than many other artists do in their finished pieces.

Frazetta's sketchbook pages likewise bristle with energy and facility. You can see a mind at play and a passion to master all forms. As Arnie Fenner states, it's almost like watching over Frazetta's shoulder as he actually works.

Of course, one overpowering theme of this book is the female form. There was never another fantasy artist before or since who idolized womanhood or portrayed it more solidly and powerfully. No wispy, anorexic, plasticized women here, just big, corn-fed goddesses. Look at the woman with tiger on page 69, thick-hipped and big-paunched. There's sexy for you. I'm surprised the full-figure-pride movement hasn't adopted Frazetta as one of their icons. Or maybe they have!

In his back-cover blurb, fellow artist Todd Schorr calls Frazetta "a cartoonist who can paint with the skill of an Old Master." That's really the essence of his style and success. The vibrancy and energy of an animation with the surface glow and deep substance of fine art.

Frazetta may no longer regale us regularly from the paperback or magazine

racks, but his legacy shines as brightly as ever, as this volume gleefully attests.

Life in Sparseland

Considering the mathematical themes that inform Greg Egan's new collection, *Dark Integers* (Subterranean Press, hardcover, \$25.00, 232 pages, ISBN 978-1-59606-155-2), it's only fitting that the book itself possesses a kind of formal symmetry in its table of contents. Two stories—"Luminous" and "Dark Integers"—revolve around a parallel universe tucked inside our familiar one, and distinguished from ours by the contrary theorems underpinning its ontology. Two other pieces—"Riding the Crocodile" and "Glory"—concern a far-future galactic polity called the Amalgam. And the final tale, "Oceanic," independent of either series, is balanced by an introduction up front of the volume that is, I believe, unique among Egan's oeuvre in that it actually lets us inside the head of this unassuming but brilliant Pynchon of the SF world. Add everything together, and you get a stunning mosaic that resembles some kind of mutant Penrose-tiling of the reader's brain.

Let's consider the items in their order of appearance.

Egan's introduction speaks to the feasibility of some of his more abstruse mathematical speculations, and conveys the amount of deep thinking he's invested in these tales. But moving on to the stories themselves, we find that they are far from arid, plotless, character-free essays.

"Luminous" begins like a thriller, with our narrator/protagonist Bruno about to be sliced and diced for the information he has concealed within his veins. After a deft escape, we learn that Bruno and his partner-in-number-theory Alison have detected a peculiar "border" in the cosmos, beyond which different rules of math apply. This new domain turns out to be inhabited by a mysterious kind of life—which fights back against humanity's intrusive logic probes. By story's end, a truce is reached.

An immortal couple inhabiting the post-scarcity Amalgam civilization decide to end their lives in "Riding the Crocodile," but only after one last grand adventure: seeking to contact the Aloof, an unknown quantity at the galaxy's center. Their pursuit takes tens of millennia, at the end of which—well, let's say they find cause to revise their goals.

Back to Bruno and Alison in "Dark Integers." They have an individual contact now in the other realm, a being named Sam, who calls our universe "Sparseland." But when another human mathematician named Campbell stumbles upon the secret by thrashing about in Sam's universe with damaging consequences, Sam turns hostile and soon a deadly war erupts, waged with integer bombs and equation missiles.

In "Glory," two Amalgam citizens named Joan and Anne transmit themselves to the backward world of the Noudah to investigate the leavings of an extinct three-million-year-old species of expert mathematicians, whose final unified theory of all math might offer something even the Amalgam doesn't own.

Finally, in "Oceanic," on the watery world of Covenant, engineered humans revere the Angels who created them and their strange P-J-Farmeresque biology—until experiments into "the biochemistry of religious experience" begin to undermine their faith.

These masterful stories reveal that Egan's art has progressed since his quietly stunning journeyman days: progressed to the point where neither speculations nor story take a backseat, but both are firmly integrated into a compelling whole. Real human emotions such as the autumnal romance between Leila and Jasim in "Crocodile" share the page easily and congenially with hardcore physics chatter.

This collection showcases one vital theme: the necessity for communication. For Egan, it's a primal impulse as vital as sex or hunger. Humans must communicate with Sam's people for both races to survive. The Amalgam must communi-

cate with the Aloof. And the opposed sects in "Oceanic" must communicate across their ideological barriers to get the fullest view of reality. If this isn't one of the core themes of SF, I don't know what is. And Egan works the territory beautifully, proffering novel insights of great utility.

Egan's UK publisher, Gollancz, just reissued all his works in a uniform trade paper edition that would look gorgeous on any fan's shelf, and which was meant to herald the appearance of a new novel, *Incandescence*, an adventure of the Amalgam. Perhaps we'll be covering that one here next time.

Just Another Moment in Spacetime

In *Year Million* (Atlas & Co., trade paperback, \$16.00, 336 pages, ISBN 978-0-9777433-4-6), editor Damien Broderick—a name that should be well known to SF readers, attached as it is to a number of excellent novels—has assembled one of those stimulating seed volumes (think Eric Drexler's *Engines of Creation* [1986]) from which a thousand subsequent SF stories will invariably grow, as eager magpie writers plunder the essays therein for yeasty speculations that can be fictionalized. In this, he's done a great service to the genre. But of course, there's a nobler and vaster accomplishment here: causing the averagely curious and intelligent general reader who might chance upon this book to ponder Great Matters beyond the immediate short-term horizon of his or her own lifetime. As more than one author remarks in these pages, such far-off speculations actually encourage closer attention to the present, and induce useful lateral thinking about our current problems and opportunities.

Broderick assembles a varied assortment of writers to tackle the prospects of mankind's next thousand millennia, and they naturally exhibit a variety of angles of attack, from the intimate scale to the vastly impersonal. We have SF authors such as Catherine Asaro, Rudy Rucker, Gregory Benford, Pamela Sargent, Wil

McCarthy, and George Zebrowski. We have physicists and computer scientists, as well as journalists, generalists, and medical specialists. Together, they examine such issues as the transformation of our planetary environment, the evolution—directed or natural—of our species, the engineering of the solar system, and, ultimately, survival into and beyond the heat death of the cosmos.

Many of these concepts will be familiar to the average SF reader. Strip-mining Jupiter, as Steven B. Harris details in his essay, "A Million Years of Evolution," might seem like old-hat stuff. But I don't believe I have ever before encountered a convincing rationale for strip-mining the gas giants of other solar systems and shipping the matter back home, as Harris presents. The book is full of similar ah-ha moments, when the overly self-assured reader imagines he's heard it all, only to have the carpet yanked out from under him. Wil McCarthy's notion of "planettes"—"artificial bodies resembling planets but with unnaturally dense cores that allow them to be much less massive than regular planets while still retaining approximately Earthlike gravity and a thick layer of breathable air"—is one such. How to create such a habitable mini-world? Easy as pie! "The moon, for example, could be compressed into a permanently habitable planette . . . by surrounding [it] with a thin jacket of antimatter . . . [creating] a planet-sized bomb that . . . produces huge pressures uniformly around the entire surface." Just picture a gigantic invisible Superman squeezing a lump of coal to diamond.

Such a litany of physical wonders—and allied dangers and traps and roadblocks; not all is peachy super-science—leaves one's head spinning, right up until the final chapter—a philosophical prose-poem by Zebrowski that examines the emotional and spiritual aspects of such developments. It's the perfect restorative or perspective-granting caper to the preceding chapters, emphasizing that the reason for all this intellectu-

al speculation is, to some degree, merely to prepare a future home for the average individual whom Ursula K. Le Guin referred to as "Mrs. Brown," the quotidian, quintessential human character. However many alterations our environment and appearance and capabilities undergo, a kernel of Mrs. Brown endures forever, and justifies everything else.

Grandfather Clock and Mama Engine Must Die

S.M. Peters' debut novel, *Whitechapel Gods* (Roc, mass-market paperback, \$6.99, 374 pages, ISBN 978-0-451-46193-3), will assuredly, if there is any justice in the literary world, appear on the ballot for next year's PKD Award. It's a solid, thrilling piece of entertainment: flush with good characters, coherent world-building, and scintillating action sequences. It does admittedly wear its influences on its sleeve—New Weird, steam-punk, dystopian cinema such as *The Matrix* trilogy—but that's no real offense, especially when a newbie author is working out the anxiety of influence. I confidently predict more fine books of an even more idiosyncratic nature from Mr. Peters.

The origin of this dangerous, evil milieu we come to immediately inhabit in a slambang cinematic opener occurred in 1877. Amidst familiar Victorian London, the district of Whitechapel experienced a sudden infestation. Two alien immaterial gods of unknown provenance established themselves in the city: Mama Engine and Grandfather Clock. Their mortal (?) agent was one Baron Hume. The Baron's soldiers were the Boiler Men, murderous cyborg automatons. The district was walled off from the rest of the city, and a bizarre architecture began to grow, resulting in an iron-bound labyrinth of many levels, towers of one hundred stories high, and the Stack—the enigmatic fortress where Mama Engine's "Great Work" project got underway. The humans trapped in Whitechapel were fated to live a life of pain and misery.

Naturally, attempts were made to

wrest the district back, to drive out the invaders. Oliver Sumner, agent of the Queen, led an abortive Uprising that was soon brutally put down. Now, years later, Oliver and his fellow plotters—a motley bunch—believe they have chanced upon a god-killing device, its blueprint encoded on a scrap of paper. All they have to do is find the scrap, avoid getting killed by Hume and his minions—including one John Scared—evade falling victim to the various horrible mech-organic plagues that stalk the city, manufacture the device, and deliver it to the very heart of the Stack. Oh, yes, not forgetting that Clock and Engine are able to infiltrate their very consciousnesses, and also that there are traitors within their ranks.

From this description, I think you'll see bits China Miéville's New Weird influence. The character attitudes and general culture and gadgetry bespeak the steam-punk strain. My earlier mention of the *Matrix* films alludes to the way the victims of Grandfather Clock become wired up in series to form part of his living substance. But Peters weaves it all into a believable whole that becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

The one thing that his *Whitechapel* lacks, however, is a sense of daily existence. It's hard to see how this society could have held together cohesively for any number of years. Unlike Miéville's New Crobuzon, there's no real sense of functioning commerce or art or politics. *Whitechapel* is merely a Dantean hellscape, a surreal pit of suffering. Allusion is made to jobs and family life. The character of Missy the prostitute implies the standard commercial quid-pro-quo of our world. But there's no real fleshing out of any of this to the point where I believed in shops or jobs, saloons or theaters. The hardscrabble life is unrelentingly centered solely around not drawing down the wrath of the Boiler Men or the gods. Beneath the gaudy surface, there's no other there there.

In any case, however, Peters provides a non-stop series of exciting crises for his

characters to surmount, and a goal of freedom from enslavement that is certainly endorsable and empathy-inducing. Visit Whitechapel—but try to avoid catching the clack!

**Blue Snowmen, the Mudwife,
Bottled Cities, and Over a Dozen
Other Wonders**

Last year we saw the appearance of a really superb general-interest anthology of the fantastic: Jonathan Strahan's *Eclipse 1*. This kind of non-themed collection was once central to the field. Think *New Dimensions*, *Universe*, *Orbit*, *Nova*, and others. Nowadays, as we well know, the thematic anthology holds sway. Having a specially baited hook is deemed essential for capturing and satisfying a finicky audience. Publishers seem to believe that a heterogeneous collection will inevitably contain one or more things the purchaser will not enjoy, like a box of chocolates featuring a Crunchy Frog candy or three. But I prefer these generalist volumes, for they cannot go stale with predictability, and introduce flavors you might not otherwise choose to sample, stuck in your own narrow groove of predetermined interests.

Leave it to the veteran editor Ellen Datlow to assemble just such an enticingly variegated volume, on a par with Strahan's. *The Del Rey Book of Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Del Rey, trade paperback, \$16.00, 416 pages, ISBN 978-0-345-49632-4) is a trove of marvelous tales. Reading it is akin to taking a high-velocity, low-altitude flight above the topography of the entire field of the fantastic.

Datlow's contributors include the famous, the moderately well-known, and the as yet unheralded. She has gotten their best work from all of them.

We start with Jason Stoddard's "The Elephant Ironclads," which is a kind of Waldropian alternate history set among Native Americans in the USA's Southwest. Lucy Sussex's "Arden Clouds" concerns a woman whose avocation is recording volcanic events, and it reads

like prime Zelazny, of all things. A strange pastorate called "Gather" emanates from the pen of Christopher Rowe, while Elizabeth Bear channels Tom Wolfe with "Sonny Liston Takes the Fall."

A contemporary setting and deft symbolism animate Nathan Ballin-grud's "North American Lake Monsters." A droll and scary Robinsonade is delivered by Carol Emshwiller with "All Washed Up While Looking for a Better World." My absolute favorite story comes next: Maureen McHugh's "Special Economics," a tale of near-future China and a charmingly self-confident teenaged girl named Jieling. Bruce Sterling or Cory Doctorow would be proud to call this one their own.

Richard Bowes deals with some very peculiar runaway kids in a Sixties setting in "Aka St. Mark's Place," while Margo Lanagan unleashes one of her patented scary fables in "The Goosele," featuring a horrific "mudwife." "Shira," by Lavie Tidhar, utilizes a skewed Middle Eastern setting to delve into themes of art and politics. A golem in the form of a goat? Only from the uncanny Isaac Bashevis Singer brain of Barry Malzberg, with his "The Passion of Azazel." Laird Barron puts a fugue-prone widow named Danni through some eerie changes in "The Lagerstätte." "Gladious Exposed," by Anna Tambour, is a bit of skeletal domestic spookiness.

In the home stretch we get Jeffrey Ford's tale of contagious microscopic cities in "Daltharee," Pat Cadigan's El-lisonesque "Jimmy," a second Sixties outing about a doomed boy, and finally a gonzo capper by Paul McAuley and Kim Newman, "Prisoners of the Action," in which blue snowmen aliens wreak mental and physical havoc in an Abu Ghraib-style milieu.

Besides a pleasing myriad of themes and settings, Datlow also encourages a variety of tones and styles, from the antic to the somber, the serious to the off the wall. It's this wide-ranging solicitation of viewpoints that endows this anthology—and others of its ilk—with power and impact. We can only hope for a second volume in this series soon. ○

TWENTY-THIRD ANNUAL READERS' AWARD

It hardly seems possible that we could be up to the January issue already, but that's what the calendar says—and that means that once again it's time for our Readers' Award poll, which is now in its (can this possibly be true? Seems like only yesterday that we started it!) twenty-third year.

Please vote. Most of you know the drill by now. For those of you who are new to this, we should explain a few things.

We consider this to be our yearly chance to hear from you, the readers of the magazine. That's the whole point behind this particular award. What were your favorite stories from *Asimov's Science Fiction* last year? This is your chance to let us know what novella, novelette, short story, poem, and cover artist, you liked best in the year 2008. Just take a moment to look over the Index of the stories published in last year's issues of *Asimov's* (pp.109-111) to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your three favorites in each category.

Some cautions: Only material from 2008-dated issues of *Asimov's* is eligible (no other years, no other magazines, even our sister magazine *Analog*). **Each reader gets one vote, and only one vote.** If you use a photocopy of the ballot, please be sure to include your name and address; your ballot won't be counted otherwise.

Works must also be categorized on the ballot as they appear in the Index. No matter what category you think a particular story ought to appear in, we consider the Index to be the ultimate authority in this regard, so be sure to check your ballots against the Index if there is any question about which category is the appropriate one for any particular story. In the past, voters have been careless about this, and have listed stories under the wrong categories, and, as a result, ended up wasting their votes. All ballots must be postmarked no later than **February 2, 2009**, and should be addressed to: **Readers' Award, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, 11th Fl., New York, NY. 10016.** You can also vote online at asimovs@dellmagazines.com, but you must give us your whole U.S. mailing address. We will also post online ballots at our website, so please check us out at www.asimovs.com.

Remember, you—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. No juries, no panels of experts. You are in charge here, and what you say goes. In the past, some categories have been hotly contended, with victory or defeat riding on only one or two votes, so every vote counts. Don't let it be your vote for your favorite stories that goes uncounted! So don't put it off—vote today!

BEST NOVELLA:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST NOVELETTE:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST SHORT STORY:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST POEM:

1. _____
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NAME: _____

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CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Asimov's January '09

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Speculative Fiction (r)	Oct/Nov	225
Stableford, Brian—		
Following the Pharners (nt)	Mar	18
The Philosopher's Stone (na)	Jul	90
Steele, Allen M.—		
Galaxy Blues, Part Three:		
The Fool's Errand (se)	Jan	92
Galaxy Blues, Conclusion:		
The Great Beyond (se)	Feb	86
Strauss, Erwin S.—		
Conventional Calendar (a)	Jan	142
—	Feb	142
—	Mar	142
—	Apr/May	238
—	Jun	142
—	Jul	142
—	Aug	142
—	Sep	142
—	Oct/Nov	238
—	Dec	112
Sullivan, Tim—		
Way Down East (nt)	Dec	8
Swanwick, Michael—		
From Babel's Fall'n		
Glory We Fleed (ss)	Feb	12
Tem, Melanie		
(with Steve Rasnic Tem)—		
In Concert (nt)	Dec	42
Tem, Steve Rasnic		
(with Melanie Tem)—		
In Concert (nt)	Dec	42
Utley, Steven—		

Perfect Everything (ss)	Dec	35
Slug Hell (ss)	Sep	76
The Woman Under the World (ss)	Jul	47
The World Within the World (ss)	Mar	55
Watson, Ian—		
Screams (p)	Sep	96
Wells, Catherine—		
Ghost Town (ss)	Apr/May	112
What, Leslie—		
Money Is No Object (ss)	Oct/Nov	125
Wilhelm, Kate—		
Strangers When We Meet (nt)	Apr/May	122
Williams, Sheila—		
— — — The 2008 Dell		
Magazines Award (ed)	Oct/Nov	4
— — — 2008 Readers' Awards (ed)	Sep	4
— — — 31 (ed)	Apr/May	4
— — — Harry Potter and the		
Future of Reading (ed)	Jan	4
— — — Making an Entrance (ed)	Jun	4
— — — My Rowboat (ed)	Feb	4
— — — New Dimensions	Dec	3
— — — Panning for Gold (ed)	Mar	4
— — — Two Robots and an		
Alien Walk into a Bar (ed)	Jul	4
Wolven, Nick—		
An Art, like Everything Else (ss)	Apr/May	74
Yolen, Jane—		
Goodbye Billy Goat Gruff (p)	Oct/Nov	155
Zumsteg, Derek—		
Usurpers (ss)	Sep	98

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

There's still time to take in a convention before the holiday lull; then look to January, when things resume. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

NOVEMBER 2008

14-16—WindyCon. For info, write: Box 184, Palatine IL 60078. Or phone: (817) 310-0725 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) windycon.org. (E-mail) windycon@windycon.org. Con will be held in: Lombard (near Chicago) IL (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Westin. Guests will include: Walter Koenig, John Ringo, David Mattingly, Kim Williams.

14-16—Creation. (818) 409-0960. creationent.com. Wyndham, Rosemont (Chicago) IL. J. Ackles. TV show "Supernatural."

14-16—Anime Nebraskon. animenebraskon.com. Univ. of Neb., Lincoln NE. T. Grant, M. Greenfield, R. & S. Townsend.

14-16—NovaCon. +44 0114281 1572. novacon38.org.uk. Quality Inn, Walsall, Bentley UK. Ian MacLeod, Vernon Brown.

14-16—Starfury L5. +44 07930319 119. seanharry.com. Norbeck Castle, Blackpool UK. J. Beals. "Fans of the 'L' word."

14-16—Auchinawa. auchinawa.org.uk. registrations@auchinawa.org.uk. Airport Holiday Inn, Glasgow UK. Anime.

15-16—Dimensions. +44 (0) 20 8597 5964. Britannia Hotel, Newcastle-on-Tyne UK. Hines, Watling, Padbury. Doctor Who.

20-23—Janicon. janicon.org. info@janicon.org. Hyatt, Jacksonville FL. Chris Ayres, Steve Bennett, J'Scape. Anime.

21-23—PhilCon. philcon.org. Crowne Plaza, Cherry Hill NJ. Tim Powers, John Picacio, Scott Christian Sava.

21-23—OryCon. orycon.org. Waterfront Marriott, Portland OR. Harry Turtledove, artist Jeff Fennel, singer Cecelia Eng.

21-23—New England Fan Experience. (781) 986-8735. nefc.us. Hyatt, Cambridge MA. Takei. Multi-genre extravaganza.

21-23—Creation. (818) 409-0960. Airport Marriott, Burbank CA. Luttrell, Glau. Stargate Atlantis and Firefly/Serenity.

21-23—MidWest FurFest. furfest.org. Westin, Wheeling (Chicago) IL. Darc & Matt Sowers. Anthropomorphics/furries.

21-23—tzumCon. tzumicon.com. Oklahoma City OK. Anime.

21-23—OnlCon. onlcon.com. Hilton, Lamar (Houston) TX. Chris Patton, Greg Ayres. Anime.

22-23—SuperMegaFest. (201) 261-4982. supermegafest.com. Sheraton, Framingham (Boston) MA. A. West, B. Ward.

28—VulKon, Box 551437, FL Lauderdale FL 33355. (954) 888-9697. Marriott East, Indianapolis IN. Media-oriented event.

28-30—LosCon, 11513 Burbank Blvd., N. Hollywood CA 91601. loscon.org. LAX Marriott, L.A. CA. Scalzi. "Togas!"

28-30—Tardis, Box 2660, Glen Ellyn IL 60138. chicagotardis.com. Westin, Lombard (Chicago) IL. Baker, Cornell. Dr. Who.

28-30—Darkover, Box 7203, Silver Spring MD 20907. darkovercon.org. Crowne Plaza, Timonium (Baltimore) MD. Briggs.

DECEMBER 2008

5-7—KajonkaCon, 175 Park, Crossville TN 38555. (931) 200-4064. kajonk-a-con.com. Knoxville TN. Gaming, anime.

5-7—Battlestar Starfury, 148a Queensway, Bayswater London W2 6LY, UK. +44 07930319 119. seanharry.com. Thistle.

11-14—SMOFCCon, Box 13559, Columbus OH 43213. (614) 221-7008. midohiosf.org. Drury Inn. Con organizers talk shop.

JANUARY 2009

9-11—RustyCon, Box 27075, Seattle WA 98165. rustycon.com. SeaTac Marriott. Jay Lake, James Stanley Daugherty.

9-11—GAFilk, Box 702, Alpharetta GA 30009. gafilk.org. Airport Crowne Plaza, Atlanta GA. Kirby, Feld. SF folksinging.

16-19—Arlisa, Bldg. 600, #322, 1 Kendall Sq., Cambridge MA 02139. arlisa.org. Hyatt. Hunt, Seeley, the Dicks.

23-25—ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107. stilyagi.org. Marriott, Troy MI. D. H. Stein, D. Rozian, M. Andaluz.

23-25—ChattaCon, Box 23908, Chattanooga TN 37422. chattacon.org. Choo Choo Holiday Inn. D. Weber, K. Kurtz, Rowena.

23-25—COSine, 1245 Allegheny Dr., Colorado Springs CO 80919. firstfridayfandom.org. Best Western Academy. Martin.

AUGUST 2009

6-10—Anticipation, CP 105, Montreal QC H4A 3P4. anticipationst.ca. Gaiman, Hartwell, Doherty. WorldCon. US\$/C\$215.

SEPTEMBER 2010

2-6—AussieCon 4, GPO Box 1212, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia. aussiecon4.org.au. The World SF Convention. US\$90.

THE CALCULATIONS OF GODS...

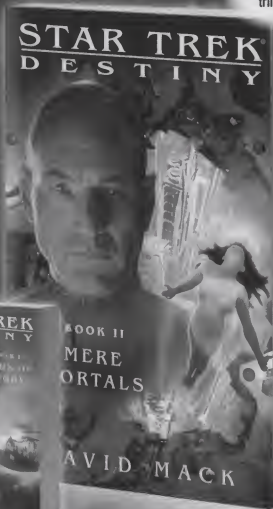
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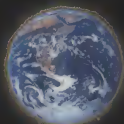
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